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"It's [Not] Only Lines On Paper, Folks!": The Curious Literary Identity of the Graphic Novel

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“It’s [Not] Only Lines On Paper, Folks!”:
The Curious Literary Identity of the Graphic Novel

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Oona Blood Cullen

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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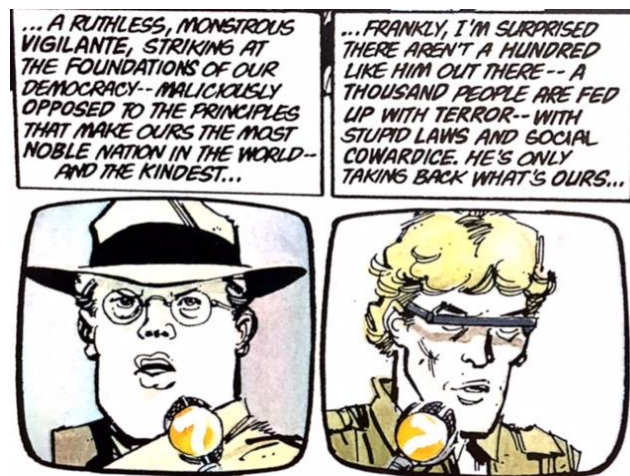
To my amazing parents, for everything, but especially for making my experience at Bard possible. You will never know how much I appreciate it, and you. I love you both. Thank you.

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Introduction

In Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, the media is omnipresent, relentlessly presenting the opposing views of individuals about the moral justification of the title character. In one such scene, two civilians present their views:



Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns 30th Anniversary Edition*
(Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2016), [54].

These two men discuss the same person, consider the same actions, and come to entirely different conclusions. For the man on the left, Batman's actions render him a ruthless, lawless creature whose very existence undermines his understanding of what it means to fulfill the category of "American." For the man on the right, Batman's ethos and willingness to fight back against a broken system renders him a hero. Both men are right in some way: Batman *is* ruthless—he beats people to the point of paralysis—and he *is* a vigilante—possessing no official authority for the damage he inflicts. On the other hand, the citizens of Gotham *are* being terrorized and the police *are* ineffective in stopping the terror and protecting the people, even at their own admission, providing compelling justification for the argument of the man on the right.

This difference of opinion between the two men represents a problem of classification: Batman is too vast, too truly representative of two such opposing categorizations—that of villain and that of hero—to reside comfortably within either designation. The problem is that Batman is both, and so, in some ways, neither.

When Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*, and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* were released in 1986, each work created a problem of classification. What was the essence of this problem? Each work had deep roots in two worlds long disparate: that of comics, and that of literature. The three were unmistakably born of the world of comics: their form consisted of a combination of word and image, their narratives relied on the tropes and concerns of the tradition—superheroes, funny animals, even the iconic comics figure of Batman—and their stories often contemplated the identity of the medium in fairly overt ways. But these works belie their easy categorization within this designation. The 1986 “Big Three,” as I will refer to them, build their narratives around attention to the “higher order” concerns of avant-garde, boundary-pushing, twentieth century literary fiction: meta-textualism, subversive and conscientious attention to form, focus on internality, the demand that interacting with these texts represents a “difficulty” and requires “work,” and the asking of “big questions.” This problem of classification, raised by the tenuous alignment of these three works with these two divergent categories, demands the formulation of each work in a literary category all its own.

But from where does this tension between literary concerns and the conventions of comics arise, and what makes these works so subversive for embodying aspects of both? The answer lies within the opposing historical concerns of each discipline. The history of comics is fraught with associations to commercialism. For the sake of clarification, comics must be

understood both in terms of their status as a medium, as well as in terms of their status as a tradition. The medium of comics can be defined in terms of what Scott McCloud refers to as “sequential art”: side-by-side panels of drawing, usually—though not always—images in combination with words which come together to tell a story.¹ The tradition of the “comic book,” or “comic” refers to the historical (and contemporary) status of many examples of this medium. The critic Aaron Meskin troubles the idea of defining comics merely through narrative structure, demanding instead that the historical movements of comics be examined and taken into account.² Thus when I refer to “comic books” or comics, I necessarily refer to a historically located subset of the medium of comics. The lowbrow associations of comics arise from both the form of the medium, as well as from the history of the tradition.

The tradition of comics came into being in the 1930’s in the form of both newspaper funny pages and comic books. Charles Hatfield describes this distinction in his book “Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature,” describing the historical roots of these early comics. Newspaper comics, explains Hatfield, “consist of a miscellany of features and genres, most bound by the rigid constraints of the daily strip... comics produced for it are seen as secondary features at best.”³ Hatfield clarifies that the comic book, on the other hand, “is a small, self-contained magazine or pamphlet,” which “in the early days of the industry... incorporated a miscellany of features both narrative and non-narrative,” but which has more recently come to “concentrate on a single character or group of characters.”⁴ This focus on character has become integral to the identity of the comic book, and has played an essential role in shaping the

¹ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), [144-5].

² Meskin, Aaron. "Defining Comics?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 4 (2007): 370. JSTOR.

³ Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), [4].

⁴ Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, [4].

narrative of the comic book, which often hinges on the actions of a character or group of characters. According to Hatfield, “if the history of comics is... a history of objects, then in the United States the comic book... has been the most influential of those objects in terms of shaping critical opinion.”⁵ By Hatfield’s estimation, the comic book provides the key to the American cultural understanding of the comics tradition, which explains the lowbrow associations of the genre, when the historical aims and norms of that particular artifact are considered.

Comic books were, and to a large degree still are, products. As we now conceive of them, comic books began their life as “promotional giveaways for industries otherwise unassociated with entertainment or art” (i.e. advertisements).⁶ Almost all of the defining physical markers of comics, from the speed with which they were produced and made available (“cranked out at great speed and minimal cost for...mostly juvenile readers”)⁷ to the iconic shape and size, to the pop-color scheme, grew from the necessity to cut cost and increase revenue.

This consumer driven relationship is even made manifest in the traditional association of comics books with children. As M.O. Grenby points out in *The Cambridge Companion to Children’s Literature*, “children’s literature is a commodity, a product... marketed at children and their guardians.”⁸ The lowbrow status of comics as a byproduct of association with children is not merely commercial, however. In terms of the medium of comics, the reliance on visual means in order to tell a story has long been indicted by critics who claim that comics promoted illiteracy, in that their narratives could presumably be understood by children without reading the words.⁹

⁵ Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, [5].

⁶ Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, [9].

⁷ Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, [9].

⁸ M.O. Grenby, "The Origins of Children's Literature," 2009, in *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*, ed. M.O. Grenby and Andrea Immel (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2009), [6].

⁹ Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, [9].

The Alternative Comics and Underground Comix movements, which arose in the early 1960's challenged the convention that all representatives of the comics medium were necessarily concerned with the commercial. Characterized by their rejection of the censorship of mainstream comics and commercialized leanings of the tradition of comics, nevertheless for these movements raunch was still the watchword. Alt-comics and comix creators did however retain an inclination to adopt and interact with traditional elements from the more commercial, pulp comics that came before them, even as they rejected the commercial drives and self-censorship of the tradition from which they emerged. The impulse of these works to subvert but still engage with the tradition of comics would pave the way for the emergence of the "Big Three" in 1986. *Maus*, *Watchmen*, and *The Dark Knight Returns* are works more concerned with presenting a literary identity than their alt-comics forebears, but their engagement in a similar subversion of tradition supports the idea that their appearance some twenty years after the inception of alt-comics and comix bears close connection to the boundary pushing work of these movements.

Outside of these underground movements however, the comics industry,¹⁰ from its inception in the 1930's to the current day, makes no bones about its commercially-driven status. Matthew P. McAllister describes the comic book industry as being "characterized by increased conglomeration and ownership concentration."¹¹ This focus is made clear by the bevy of extremely commercially successful superhero flicks released in the past five years.¹² Critic Scott Bukatman even opines that "[t]he superhero film has displaced the superhero comic in the world

¹⁰ Which is almost entirely encapsulated under the purview of DC Comics and Marvel Comics

¹¹ Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, Jr., and Ian Gordon, *Comics and Ideology* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2009), [19].

¹² In 2012, three of the top ten highest grossing films of the year were superhero movies based on comic books (*The Avengers*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and *The Amazing Spiderman*); in 2013, three of the top twelve (*Thor: The Dark World*, *Man of Steel*, and *Iron Man Three*); in 2014, a whopping five of the top eleven (*Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Captain America: Winter Soldier*, *The Amazing Spiderman 2*, *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.) Karen Moltenbray, "The 2014 Box Office and Superhero Domination," *Computer Graphics World*, 37, no. 6 (November 2014): [67], Academic Search Premier.

of mass culture...”¹³ This conflation is extremely demonstrative of the cultural role of comics in the United States: the comic was born, and has lived most of its life to date, as a preeminent artifact of the commercial, a consummate product.

In his seminal essay “Avant Garde and Kitsch,” Clement Greenberg sets out to clarify the identifying spirit of the avant-garde, by means of defining the distinction between avant-garde, or “high” art, and kitsch, or “low” art. Greenberg savages kitsch, describing it as “mechanical” and positing that it “operates by formulas.”¹⁴ The most vehement indictment comes a few lines later: “[k]itsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.”¹⁵ This denunciation hinges on two of the main operating principles of the tradition of comics: the “mechanical” reliance on tropes and formulaic storylines—like romance, noir detective, and superhero—and the failure of the tradition to demand “anything” from their audience outside of financial compensation—not consideration, nor effort, nor even engagement.

In his characterization of the avant-garde on the other hand, Greenberg asserts the necessity to engage with “controversy” on the part of the artist.¹⁶ For Greenberg, it is the nature of the avant-garde artist to engage with controversy by seeking to “find a path along which it is possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence.”¹⁷ Greenberg indicates that deep attention to form is the way in which the avant-garde pushes these boundaries of content into the realm of attention to keeping “culture moving.”

¹³ Scott Bukatman, “Why I Hate Superhero Movies,” *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 3: [118], Academic Search Premier.

¹⁴ Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), [10].

¹⁵ Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, [10].

¹⁶ Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, [10].

¹⁷ Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, [5].

The concerns of twentieth century literary fiction in the United States shares many roots with the interconnected ethos of modernist and avant-garde literature. The distillation of these concerns is the impetus to push boundaries: both in terms of form and in terms of content. The characterization of the avant-garde is inextricable from the concerns of Modernism, and both represent great influencers of twentieth century literary fiction in America. Modernist literature is typified by experimentation, what Robert Boyers describes as artists “asking themselves at every turn what they are doing and thinking about the limits and possibilities peculiar to their medium.”¹⁸ Modernist literature must be self-conscious, must break with tradition, must be complex and nuanced, asking difficult questions through the “seductiveness of the subversive” without providing clear answers, points, or goals.

Because comics grew out of advertisements into mass-produced pulp narratives, defined by tropes and marketed primarily to children and soldiers, their very existence embodied an appeal to audience and a disinterest in “larger questions” and “important issues.” Thus it seems, comics, in their historical reality, exist in direct opposition to the parameters proposed by Greenberg for “high” art, and fulfill many of his designations of kitsch. As products that are fundamentally concerned with commercial appeal rather than artistic weight, most representatives of the comics tradition are in direct opposition to the concerns of twentieth century literary fiction.

And so the tension between the culturally understood roots of the comics tradition and the concerns of literary fiction come into clarity. With their ties both to this medium so deeply associated with kitsch, alongside their “higher order concerns,” the 1986 Big Three sowed confusion. They were comics, unmistakably employing a combination of word and image in

¹⁸ Robert Boyers, *The Fate of Ideas: Seductions, Betrayals, Appraisals* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), [211], JSTOR.

order to tell their stories and even relying on highly recognizable comics and cartoon tropes: the superhero, the “funny animal,” even Batman. But each of these works also defied the simple associations of the tradition from which they arose, creeping decidedly, and for many uncomfortably, into the periphery of the designation of “literary.”

What arose from this problem of identity was the newly widespread use of the relatively young designating term “graphic novel.” The term “graphic novel” is thought to have first emerged in 1964-5 in *Graphic Stories Magazine*, and rose to some small prominence around 1978 when it was first employed in self-declaration by alt-comics heavyweight Will Eisner. The term did not reach the level of recognizability or prominence which it currently enjoys, however, until after the release of the Big Three in 1986.¹⁹

In some cases, the designation of graphic novel is self-selected by creators (as was the case with Will Eisner), but in others the designation renders creators somewhat uncomfortable. Many critics, including Hatfield, assert that the term “graphic novel” was invented to assuage cultural discomfort with referring to works like *Maus* as comics. As such, the term is highly contentious, rejected by some creators, including Art Spiegelman as being a “euphemism that people have used to say that comics are not a guilty pleasure.”²⁰ For Spiegelman, the explanation lies in a public desire for a more highbrow term for these works that challenged accepted notions of what a graphic narrative could be. Spiegelman posits that “graphics” and “novels” are two designations that suggest this “respectability,” lacked by comics as a medium.²¹ A graphic novel has deep ties to the medium of comics, but invents itself within a new category; allowed to

¹⁹ Charles Hatfield, “Graphic Novel,” 2011, in *Keywords for Children's Literature*, ed. Philip Nel and Lissa Paul (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2011), [102], JSTOR.

²⁰ W. J. T. Mitchell and Art Spiegelman, “Public Conversation: What The %\$#! Happened To Comics?” *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 3 (2014): [23], MLA International Bibliography.

²¹ Mitchell and Spiegelman, “Public Conversation,” [23].

reference conventions and employ devices from the tradition for the purposes of meta-criticism, but not to truly engage with them. To “engage” after all, implies a certain commitment to the tradition which graphic novels do not require.

Ultimately it is less important that the “Big Three” be classified as graphic novels, than it is that each of these works defies classification to such a degree as to necessitate their designation under such an amorphous and fraught term. These works confuse because they assert their connection to the tradition from which they arise, and because they resolutely refuse categorization within the lowbrow simplicity of the comics that came before. All three of these works are concerned with their own historical moment, as well as with the history of their tradition. They are self-referential in this way, but also subversive in terms of medium, and none of them provide simple answers to the difficult questions they pose. These works resist classification, and forge their literary identities in defiance of the norms and expectations of both their literary roots and their comics roots.

Each of these works exemplify this tension in their own particular ways. As such, I have dedicated a chapter of this project to each work, breaking down the different ways in which each one makes use of both the traditional elements of comics as well as the conventional markers of boundary-pushing twentieth century literary fiction. Chapter One engages in close reading of Spiegelman’s *Maus* in order to unpack the ways in which the work grapples with the sticky task of representing a Holocaust narrative authentically, while at the same time crafting a critical and personally-examinatory narrative. *Maus* makes use of visual fantasticism and the comics trope of “funny animals,” both of which are singularly available to it as a comic and a descendent of comics, in order to achieve these higher order concerns, the result of which is a narrative that achieves its high literary goals via its lowbrow comics associations.

Chapter Two employs close reading and engages with critical essays in order to explore a somewhat different relationship between concerns of the literary and relationship to the tradition and medium of comics. In the chapter, I explore *Watchmen*'s utilization of the comics trope of the superhero, and how cultural connotations of the trope are used by the characters in the text to forge problematically simplistic frameworks through which they may grapple with their difficult world. But if the critical relation of this comics trope to higher-order questions about coping with a dark and chaotic world were not enough to create ambiguity about the categorical identity of *Watchmen*, the text further complicates the boundary between literary qualities and comics conventions through implication of the audience in the very phenomena it explores.

Chapter Three makes use of historical research into the figure of Batman in order to illustrate a still different balance between the literary and comics conventions. The chapter concerns the way in which Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* asserts its identity as a very traditional comic through its representation of the iconic character of Batman, but at the same time troubles the conventional belief that comics which adhere to, and identify themselves within, tradition cannot also embody the boundary pushing qualities of literary fiction.

Following the release of these three game-changing works, more and more long-form graphic narratives which defy the so-called simplicity of the designation of comics have appeared and become part of the cultural conversation; Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000), Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), and the recent *March* (2013) series by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell are examples of this. These works have received critical acclaim: *Fun Home* was nominated for National Book Critics Circle Award, *March* has won several high profile awards, including the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award, a National Book Award for Young People's Literature, and a Printz award. The critical acceptance indicated by the bestowal

of these awards indicates a recent shift in literary acceptability of the graphic narratives. While the 1986 Big Three all operate as standalone works, their influence in terms of these newly emergent graphic narratives cannot be overstated. *Maus*, *Watchmen*, and *The Dark Knight Returns*, are all agents of change in the literary community, as well as in the comics community, because they are works which defy classification and as such demand that critical attention be paid to the problematic impulse to classify in the first place.

Chapter One

“Giant Mouse Answers the Door”:

The Visual Fantasticism and Contentious “Authenticity” of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*

In 1991, the *New York Times* listed Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* on their best seller list. This was no surprise; the cultural leviathan had already, at that point, been nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award in 1986, was about to be nominated for another National Book Award in 1991, and would soon after that achieve the ultimate coup, the winning of the Pulitzer Prize in 1992—the first ever awarded to a graphic narrative. The only issue with *Maus*’s inclusion on the bestseller list? It was included on the “fiction” list, rather than the “nonfiction” one.

This is an unsettling designation. *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History* and *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began*, follow the story of the author Art Spiegelman as he interviews his father about his experiences of World War II: first, doing all he can to keep his family safe in Nazi-occupied Poland, and then ultimately trying to survive in the Nazi death camp Auschwitz. The classification of this true Holocaust narrative as fiction is resultantly somewhat chilling, or at the very least troubling.

In the wake of this designation, Spiegelman wrote a letter to the editor, subsequently entitled “A Problem of Taxonomy,” addressing the particular issues of classifying a narrative of this kind under a designation defined by the status of being imaginary or untrue. Spiegelman writes: “If your list were divided into literature and nonliterature, I could gracefully accept the

compliment as intended, but to the extent that "fiction" indicates that a work isn't factual, I feel a bit queasy."²² He goes on to say:

I shudder to think how David Duke—if he could read—would respond to seeing a carefully researched work based closely on my father's memories of life in Hitler's Europe and in the death camps classified as fiction. I know that by delineating people with animal heads I've raised problems of taxonomy for you.²³

The *New York Times* immediately agreed to change the classification on their listing.²⁴ And yet Spiegelman's point, that the mere designation of fiction belies the reception of this story as a true recollection of someone's real life, raises an integral question. What it is about *Maus* that precipitated this somewhat egregious misclassification? It is not as if *The New York Times* is in the business of denying the Holocaust after all.

Spiegelman himself points out the issue in his reference to “delineating people with animal heads,” and this impulse was immediately confirmed by the voices dissenting to the *Times*' quick correction of this error. One *New York Times* editor is famously rumored to have commented: “Let's go out to Spiegelman's house and if a giant mouse answers the door, we'll move it to the nonfiction side of the list!”²⁵ This comment confirms that the choice on the part of Spiegelman to create his characters in the form of animals rather than the form of humans renders the “truth” (or at least non-fictiveness) of the story being told by the images as questionable. It can be safely assumed that this rumored editor is not questioning the veracity of

²² Art Spiegelman, "A Problem of Taxonomy," *New York Times*, December 29, 1991
<http://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/29/books/1-a-problem-of-taxonomy-37092.html>.

²³ Spiegelman, "A Problem."

²⁴ Spiegelman, "A Problem."

²⁵ Glyn Morgan, "Speaking the Unspeakable and Seeing the Unseeable: The Role of Fantastika in Visualizing the Holocaust," *The Luminary (Lancaster University)* 6 (Summer 2015): [15], JSTOR.

Vladek Spiegelman's experience. For this editor there is, within *Maus*, a delineation between the capacity of each component of its medium to represent "truth." Due to the fact that no one appears to be questioning the veracity of Vladek Spiegelman's experiences—which are related chronologically and with great attention to authenticity through the text of *Maus*—it seems that responsibility for the knee-jerk rejection of *Maus's* validity as a depiction of historical truth (or non-fictiveness) resides with the images.

The problems raised by the formal composition of *Maus* are ultimately that which define its literary identity. The text functions as a representative of the tense cross-section between the concerns of twentieth century literary fiction and the medium and tradition of comics. *Maus* makes use of visual fantasticism, subverting the traditionally understood role of the narrative image.²⁶ In so doing, the text presents its particular identity defined by subjective concerns in the tradition of the avant-garde. *Maus* engages with its image-based medium meta-textually through the inclusion of the character of Art as the author of the text, in order to assert the anxieties of representing a Holocaust narrative as a piece of art. *Maus* makes use of a challenging employment of the trope of "funny animals" (which stems from the comics tradition), the formulation of a subversive relationship of image to text, and symbolic attention to visual perspective. In so doing, the text creates itself as, simultaneously, an artifact of the tradition of comics, a representative of the medium of comics, and a work embodying the conventions of twentieth century literary fiction. Ultimately *Maus* presents itself through these, and other means, as a subjective work which illustrates, through form, the difficulties of representation inherent to it as both a piece of Holocaust testimony, and as a work of art.

...

²⁶ At least by the rumored *New York Times* editor.

In order to unpack the ways in which the formal identity of *Maus* is subversive, it is first necessary to outline the traditional roles and theoretical understandings of word and image. Distinguished Picture Theorist WJT Mitchell is referenced by Hatfield in *Alternative Comics* as an influential voice in the conversation around the medium of comics, as an expert in the theoretical roles of words and images. Mitchell makes a compelling claim about the perceived potential of images in terms of meaning-making in his essay “What is an Image?”; he writes that, with the advent of Alberti’s artificial perspective in 1435, the “world of representation” in terms of art images was commandeered by the ideals of “reason, science, and objectivity.”²⁷ Mitchell claims that the idea of representing “what we really see” was co-opted by these ideals, creating a false but almost universally held understanding that pictures created under this perspective “have a kind of identity with natural human vision and objective external space.”²⁸ In other words, he purports that the idea of artistic representations of “truth” have been co-opted by the cult of so-called “objectivity,” precluding the desires of artists who vehemently argue that a more metaphysical, and by extension less “objective,” understanding of what it is to portray something “truthfully” might be more prudent.²⁹

Mitchell warns that we, as viewers, perceive the “gulf between words and images to be as wide as the one between words and things, between (in the largest sense) culture and nature.”³⁰ The written word exists opposition in the mind of the viewer, he asserts, representing “the artificial, arbitrary production of human will that disrupts natural presence by introducing unnatural elements into the world—time, consciousness, history, and the alienating intervention

²⁷ W. J. T. Mitchell, “What Is an Image?,” *New Literary History* 15, no. 3 (1984): [523].

²⁸ Mitchell, “What Is an Image?,” [523].

²⁹ Mitchell, “What Is an Image?,” [524].

³⁰ Mitchell, “What Is an Image?,” [503].

of symbolic mediation.”³¹ Mitchell thus claims that visual images are representative of a specific kind of truth value in that they are understood not as representations of what they show, but as the thing they show itself, even when they are not photographic. In other words, images bear the expectation of representing objective reality even when, as is the case with so many objects of visual art, they do not seek to do so. Words on the other hand, are understood as a more artificial, somehow less regimentally accurate medium in that they are symbolic and inalienably tied to human invention, and thus are considered to be less specific to the thing they seek to represent.

Scott McCloud, influential comics artist and theorist, expresses a complementary view of the disparate role of words versus images in his seminal text *Understanding Comics*. McCloud writes that “[t]he written word [became] more specialized, more abstract, more elaborate—and less and less like pictures.”³² Like Mitchell, McCloud is referencing the way in which the roles of image and word grew more distant from each other. “Pictures, meanwhile,” he asserts, became “less abstract or symbolic, more representational and specific. By the early 1800’s Western art and writing had drifted about as far apart as was possible. One was obsessed with resemblance, light and color, all things visible...the other rich in invisible treasures, senses, emotions, spirituality, philosophy...”³³ This characterization is perhaps overly simplistic, glossing over the shift in the concerns of visual art to represent the abstract during and following the avant-garde and modernist movements, which Greenberg discusses in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” McCloud and Mitchell are, however, compelling in their parallelism. The characterization of the written word as having more leeway in terms of the more metaphysical “truth” available to it, and the image invoking an expectation of a more objectively truthful representation is directly relevant to

³¹ Mitchell, “What Is an Image?,” [507].

³² Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), [144-5].

³³ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, [144-5].

the medium of comics, in which images are overwhelmingly representational and overtly narrative. Resultantly, these characterizations provide a compelling explanation for the controversy of authenticity surrounding the fantastical use of images in Spiegelman's *Maus*.

In the reckonings of both Mitchell and McCloud, the alienation of image from the realm of a looser, more metaphysical characterization of truth is sensible. To expect a narrative image to deal in what can be seen is a natural logical leap perhaps, because one of the defining qualities of an image is that it is seen. Thus, a dichotomy is drawn between the acts of reading and seeing, at least in terms of the medium of comics. In some ironic way it seems that the expectation of the word is to "show" where the expectation of the image is to "tell." This problem of taxonomy in *Maus* then, seems to arise out of some kind of inversion of words and images in terms of audience expectations, at least in the estimations of Mitchell and McCloud.

Maus is a visually fantastical text. From the outset this is asserted by the delineation of characters with animal heads. Thus, *Maus* certainly *seems* to subvert the relationship presented by Mitchell; the images employed in the text, though they at times represent closely what is being imparted, are in many ways intrinsically "artificial," boldly making no attempt to portray the "real" or the "natural." Rather the images in *Maus* function as literary devices in the tradition of the avant-garde: they are the voice of subjectivity and formal meaning-making. This is what provides *Maus* its unique literary identity as a text which identifies itself both in the comics tradition and medium, as well as in the tradition of twentieth century literary fiction.

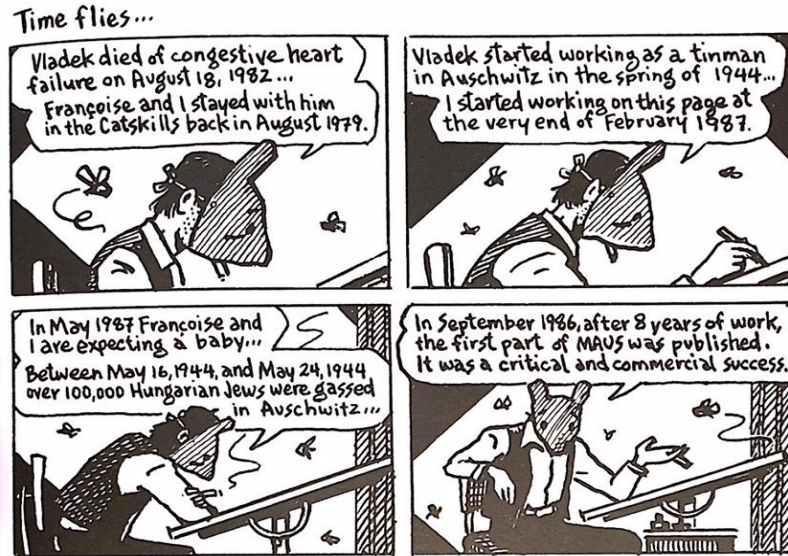
Images in *Maus* act perform a powerful function: to assert the status of the work as a piece of art, and thus as a *representation* of an event rather than an unmitigated experience of the event itself. The fantastical images of *Maus*, in combination with the more straightforward "account" provided by the text, assert that the story, though true, is inaccessible to the reader

except through a subjectively rendered simulation. This state of affairs, in combination with the meta-textual relationship of the narrative to its own author as a character, is thus able to comment critically on the impossibility of translating the experience of the horror of the Holocaust formally. Rather, *Maus* asserts itself as an artifact of secondhand witness, exploring the internal conflict and pain of being a child of survivors, and of trying to understand, let alone represent or imagine, the experience of one's parent. The futility of this endeavor is mirrored by the attitude of the formal in *Maus*, asserting the fundamental nature of art as representational simulation rather than as objective experience.

The acknowledgement of, and engagement with, visual metaphor is one of the primary ways in which *Maus* engages with its own subjective nature. Visual metaphor is my term for moments in the narrative where images do the work traditionally ascribed to words in the estimations of Mitchell and McCloud. Recall that McCloud characterized literary language as “abstract...rich in invisible treasures, senses, emotions, spirituality, philosophy.”³⁴ Visual metaphor is present when images take on the role traditionally ascribed to the written word, expressing emotion (anxiety, smallness, etc.) through fantastical visual changes to the characters or their surroundings.

Take, for example, this scene from *Maus Volume II: And Here My Troubles Began*. The chapter begins with Art, the human version of Art, clad in a mouse mask sitting at his drafting table. Flies buzz about him as he smokes and draws and addresses his desk in the first three panels of the page.

³⁴ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, [144-5].



Art Spiegelman, *And Here My Troubles Begin*, vol. II, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*
(New York, NY: Pantheon, 1991), [41].

The character Art³⁵ here presents disjointed factual realities (“Vladek died of congestive heart failure on August 18th, 1982... Françoise and I stayed with him in the Catskills back in August 1979,” and “Vladek started working as a tinman in Auschwitz in the spring of 1944... I started working on this page at the very end of February 1987.”) Art’s words provide no insight into his what he thinks about the facts he’s expressing. Other than the slight connections of the two facts presented in the first three panels, the first connection being facts involving Vladek, the second being the concept of work, the third being life and death, there is no explicit arch or anecdote being communicated verbally here.

The visual story being told by these panels, on the other hand, illuminates and provides connections between this collection of somewhat disjointed statements through employment of the fantastic. There is some hint of fantasticism in these first few panels. Art is wearing a mask, there are flies buzzing around him, clearly there is more being expressed here than the facts

³⁵ who will be referred to as “Art” for the purposes of this chapter, in opposition to when the author “Spiegelman” or “Art Spiegelman” is referenced.

presented. The metaphor is only fully presented as we reach the fifth and final panel of the page. The larger panel draws the viewer back from the close ups of the previous four panels.



Art Spiegelman, *And Here My Troubles Begin*, vol. II, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*
(New York, NY: Pantheon, 1991), [41].

Now, the whole draft table becomes visible, and Art at it, sitting atop a massive pile of emaciated dead mice-people. We now see that the flies present throughout the first four panels act as the viewer's clue that this pile has been here the whole time, ultimately coloring his words with a deep moral ambivalence. Art miserably tells the viewer: "At least fifteen foreign editions are coming out. I've gotten 4 serious offers to turn my book into a tv special or a movie. (I don't wanna.)...In May 1968 my mother killed herself. (She left no note.)...Lately I've been feeling depressed."

The flies buzzing, the bags under the eyes of Art's mask, the fact that he's wearing a mask at all, the turn of his head to address the viewer, the inching back of the viewpoint until the ghastly scene below is revealed in full: the imagery of these panels presents metaphorical resonance. This resonance more closely resembles that expected from the written word, expressing an emotion, tied up in the complex philosophic problem of representation, without

explicitly stating that which it is expressing. In this way it functions as a visual metaphor, clearly expressing the discomfort and guilt felt by Art.

The author is represented as a character within the text. By having him talk about the financial opportunities provided to him by writing *Maus*, the very work he is represented within, particularly in light of the powerful visual metaphor of the pile of bodies, represents intense turmoil. There is a clear discomfort with the work simultaneously existing as art, testimonial, and product presented visually here. The mask perhaps suggests a feeling of impostership; an acknowledgement that *Maus* cannot be more than a *rendering* of the Holocaust and thus that there is some fundamental distance between creator and the events he seeks to depict. The bodies suggest guilt, but their formal composition also references the problems of Holocaust photography, which has been called into moral consideration by many critics and artists, including Susan Sontag. Sontag expresses concerns that viewing these images provides a false sense of engagement with an atrocity the viewer can never access.³⁶ Thus it seems that visual metaphor works in tandem with the more straightforward, testimonial, written word to express the complicated anxiety of the creation of the work itself. This anxiety surrounds both the act of relating a Holocaust testimonial in general, but the more specific concern of *Maus* is embodied in the task of relating a Holocaust testimonial which is close to, but does not belong to, the person relating it.

This anxiety is presented constantly in *Maus*. In one highly illustrative scene in *Maus II*, Art goes to see his therapist, Pavel, a survivor of Auschwitz and Terezin. Art is depicted here as a human child in a mouse mask, in another example of a visual metaphor where the adult Art

³⁶ According to critic Susan Crane: "For succeeding generations...access to certain "recirculated images" has created a sense of familiarity with the Holocaust and with the National Socialist era that may prevent, rather than facilitate, engagement with the historical subject." Susan A. Crane, "Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography," *History and Theory* 47, no. 3 (2008): [310], JSTOR.

shrinks down to the size of a child in the face of reporters and developers who bombard him with questions about the release of the second volume of *Maus*. The two men commence a conversation about the difficulties Art is facing following the publication of the first volume of *Maus*, and preceding the completion of the second volume. Art talks about how he feels blocked, and the two discuss the difficulties of portraying a Holocaust narrative.

Art attempts to describe the specific problems he is facing in representing the parts of this story which are not directly his own. He expresses the problems of visualizing and imagining realities he simply was not present for.

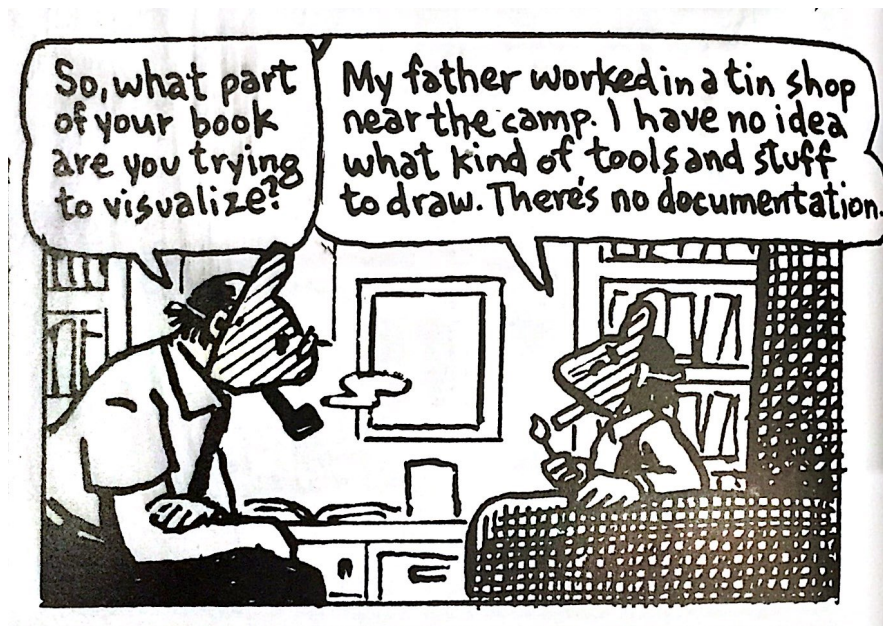


Art Spiegelman, *And Here My Troubles Begin*, vol. II, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*
(New York, NY: Pantheon, 1991), [46].

Art's admission in this first panel is a significant one: he can't *visualize*, and thus is having trouble with representation. The anxiety expressed rests on the notion of not being able to “imagine what it felt like” to experience the events he is trying to represent. It is an anxiety based in the desire for some kind of authenticity. On the surface this question of authenticity in *Maus* is a fairly practical problem: as a work that was created by someone who was not present for much

of what he describes, Art grapples with the implications of the fact that these events, though of course based strongly in Vladek Spiegelman's own words can never be represented exactly as they occurred.

This anxiety hints at one of the major concerns of the text, the inevitable impossibility of art³⁷ to represent the experience of the Holocaust, or even the more general experience of another person. Art is trying to tell his father's story, but he is fundamentally incapable, which is being expressed here in terms of the character's frustration with not being able to visualize or even imagine the experiences of his father. Art is worried that this inability will negate the authenticity or impact of his work. In an effort to assist Art in this existential anxiety, Pavel asks Art what he's specifically having trouble visualizing. Art replies:



Art Spiegelman, *And Here My Troubles Begin*, vol. II, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1991), [46].

This clarifies and sharpens Art's particular anxiety. He references the fact that there is no documentation of what the tin shop truly would have looked like. The crucial revelation of this

³⁷ Not Art.

statement is the clear delineation on the part of Art between the intentional visual metaphors he knowingly applies, and a failure to accurately represent the reality of the situation faced by his father. This statement is clearly ironic, coming as it does from a figure who has been representatively shrunk to the size of a child, who is portrayed here smoking a cigarette, and who has worn a mouse mask throughout this entire scene.

What this irony indicates is one of the most important revelations of *Maus*. The ironic dissonance between image and word indicates what Art doesn't yet understand: that the story isn't his father's, it's his. Rather, Art is participating in a process I deem "secondhand witness," the representation of his father's story through the subjective lens of his own understanding. *Maus* is not the objectively recorded story of Vladek Spiegelman, it is the translation of a father's experience through the understanding of the son, Art Spiegelman. Critic Michael Levine attests that "[t]he children of survivors...participate in increasing numbers in the process of bearing witness."³⁸ This "process of bearing witness" might seem to imply participation or at least suggest presence, but Levine here subverts this expectation claiming that the practice of "bearing witness" to the atrocity of the Holocaust is a separate but still important process for the children of survivors.

Critic Andreas Huyssen notes that for Spiegelman "the past is visually inaccessible through realistic representation: whatever strategy he might chose, it is bound to be "inauthentic."...Documentary authenticity of representation can therefore not be his goal, but authentication through the interviews with his father is."³⁹ Huyssen's point here is that the interviews with Vladek Spiegelman are what provides "authenticity," realism in representation

³⁸ Michael G. Levine, "Necessary Stains: Spiegelman's MAUS and the Bleeding of History," *American Imago* 59, no. 3 (2002): [322], Project MUSE.

³⁹ Huyssen, Andreas. "Of Mice And Mimesis: Reading Spiegelman With Adorno." *New German Critique* 81, no. 65. (2000): [237] *Academic Search Premier*.

cannot be the goal. Art Spiegelman did not bear witness to the events which befell his parents, but his imagining of the events which transpired does represent a kind of witness very specific to the work he creates. Art allows the viewer access to his anxiety to illustrate the fact that his only true power over the events which have occurred is the way in which HE presents them.

Ultimately the visual fantasticism of *Maus* acts as Art's portrayal of his relationship to the world his father describes; it is his imagined version of this reality, and thus is representative of his relationship to these events, which is most often represented by their looming presence in his emotional world. This relationship of the fantastical image to a more invisible authenticity is illustrated by these crucial scenes, underscoring the commitment of *Maus* to a subjectivity through form, and echoing Greenberg's conventions of the avant-garde. *Maus* is an artifact which bears witness to atrocity, but that does so by expressing the impact of, and relationship to the person with agency in the narrative, the creator. The events which befell the parents are portrayed through the lens of the subjectively available narrative: that belonging to the son.

The subjectivity of the narrative is also indicated visually at several junctures in *Maus*. One poignant example comes from this scene, where Vladek describes coming home after serving in the Polish military.



Art Spiegelman, *My Father Bleeds History*, vol. I, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*
(New York, NY: Pantheon, 1986), [74].

There are many layers of subjective experience being indicated visually here. The window acts as a poignant and many-layered visual metaphor. In the first place it seems to indicate present-day Vladek's experience, the experience of remembering, which is in and of itself a subjective process. Present-day Vladek is portrayed as a small figure in the corner, describing his experience. The tiny mouse-headed figure appears to look through the window, perhaps indicating the distance between the character's memory of this moment and the reality of it; the massive breadth of history between the character and these events; the tragic inaccessibility of this seemingly blissful scene for Vladek; perhaps even the distance between the figure of Vladek and the way in which this scene is being rendered, by his son who can only imagine it.

The window seems also to operate at another level. Because Art is presented as the author of the text within the narrative (and perhaps acts as a simulacrum of the author's own experience, though that is only available to speculation,) there is also the resonance of the window as a representation of the distance between Art and the events taking place. Art is the author, but as

discussed above, he can only represent these events in the secondhand, and is very conscious of this. In this sense the window perhaps acts as a symbol of Art's own separation from these events, the sole way of accessing them is as distant and obscure figures far away and visible only through the distorted window of imagination.

This distance between Art and the events which his father experienced asserts the necessity of the fantastical as a signifier of this distance, which in turn provides authenticity to *Maus* by identifying it as a critical and secondhand piece of reflective art. Huyssen quotes Spiegelman, who in reference to the Holocaust, says that he has "never been through anything like that...and it would be a counterfeit to try to pretend that the drawings are representations of something that's actually happening."⁴⁰ The focus here on the concept of producing something "counterfeit," especially because of the reality of not being present for them, connects back to Art's concerns surrounding not being able to "visualize" and the anxiety of trying to represent something you were not there for. Spiegelman goes on to say, crucially, "My notions are born of a few scores of photographs and a couple of movies. I'm bound to do something inauthentic....To use these ciphers, the cats and mice, is actually a way to allow you past the cipher at the people who are experiencing it. So it's really a much more direct way of dealing with the material."⁴¹ The directness referenced by Spiegelman here, has an implicit relationship with the status of this work as a piece of art. The "cipher," provided by both historically located symbology (i.e. representing Jews as mice as a reference to Nazi propaganda cartoons which portrayed Jews as vermin), and by the higher order functions of visual fantasticism in general, signposts *Maus* as a work of art. Thereby, *Maus* is released in some way from the pressure of being able to translate the experience of the Holocaust.

⁴⁰ Huyssen, "Of Mice," [239].

⁴¹ Huyssen, "Of Mice," [239].

This focus on the necessarily subjective nature of *Maus* provides the window in the above scene with yet another possible layer of meaning. Pieces of art are, by definition, interacted with by an audience. Occurring as it does in a very self-conscious work of art, it follows that the window could even be invoking the voyeurism inherent in the audience. This possible reference to voyeurism implicates the audience, who must also recall that they view this story from far away, separated from it by the physical barrier of *Maus* itself, as well as by time and circumstance. Perhaps the window warns that *Maus* is a piece of art, not an equivalency of experiencing the events, nor even an equivalency in bearing witness, precluding the audience from perceiving ourselves as part of the narrative and thus outside of implication in some way.

Theorist Christopher Kilgore writes in his article “Unnatural Graphic Narration: The Panel and The Sublime” that *Maus* “consistently calls attention to its own unnatural properties, and yet also invites readers to make sense of these unnatural features by integrating them into the story-world.”⁴² This “calling attention” referenced by Kilgore functions as a signposting on the part of the narrative, an underscoring of the “created-ness” of this text. Integration of these “unnatural features back into the storyworld” on the part of *Maus* demands that the viewer remember that this text is not object, but simulation. This state of affairs necessarily harkens back to one of the anxieties of *Maus* referenced above, the anxiety of any representation of a Holocaust narrative: that a representation is never enough, can never be enough, to encapsulate the reality of an experience. Thus, the rendering of *Maus* as a highly stylized work, a work which relies on cipher, also functions as a meta-textual reminder that there’s no *access* to this tragedy, not through word, nor through image.

...

⁴² Christopher D. Kilgore, "Unnatural Graphic Narration: The Panel and the Sublime," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 45, no. 1 (Winter 2015): [23], Project MUSE.

Art Spiegelman discusses the process of formulating Vladek's story into a narrative in an interview in the sprawling anthology *MetaMaus*. Spiegelman explains that the way in which Vladek expressed the story was nonlinear, asserting that "people's memories are not chronological, so the way the story would come to me would be drifting from 1933 to 1957 to 1978 back to 1942 and so on."⁴³ Spiegelman describes coming to a realization, that he would have to make a decision early in the process: "would I try to deal with the telling as he told, or would I try to tell what he was telling."⁴⁴ This crucial distinction gets at the heart of the identity of *Maus*. The choice to be true to the reality of creating, and to represent formally the experience subjectively available to the creator is inherent to the status of *Maus* as a work which embodies the conventions of twentieth century literary fiction.

Maus is certainly a comic in medium, and uses its form in order to embody these conventions, producing an odd cross section between comics and literary concerns. This cross section is also embodied by the way in which *Maus* makes subversive use of the "funny animals," trope of the comics tradition, appropriating it to act as a signifier within the "cipher" of the work. These marriages, of comics medium and "higher order" concerns, as well of an artifact of comics tradition and symbolism in the literary tradition, represent the unique literary identity of *Maus*. This identity, foregrounded by seemingly opposing disciplines and values, allows *Maus* to embody and signpost its own impossibility. *Maus* asserts itself as both necessarily authentic and intentionally artificial; representation and assertion of the implicit failure of representation; simulacrum and indictment.

⁴³ Art Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), CD-ROM.

⁴⁴ Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*.

Chapter Two

Audience as Abyss:

Moral Framework and the Inverted Gaze in Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen*

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* is a work which fundamentally troubles the American cultural preoccupation with the figure of the superhero. Of the many complex and winding storylines which come together to form the narrative of *Watchmen*, one of the more fundamental premises is that, concurrent to the rise of the superhero comic, regular citizens started dressing up as superheroes and acting as vigilantes. One of these original vigilantes, Hollis Mason, in an attempt to explain the impetus for the decision to “don the mask,” writes in his in-text autobiography “Under the Hood” that “It all started in 1938, the year when they invented the super-hero...I only had eyes for the Superman story. Here was something that presented the basic morality of the pulps without all their darkness and ambiguity.”⁴⁵

Hollis's identification of the superhero with the concept of a “basic morality” devoid of “darkness and ambiguity” is highly ironic, situated as it is in a graphic narrative which is both populated with superheroes and defined by darkness and ambiguity. It is this irony that *Watchmen* locates its literary identity as both a representative of the medium and tradition of comics, and as a work which is concerned with the conventions of twentieth century literary fiction.

In Chapter One, I discussed the ways in which *Maus* engages with its fraught identity both as a piece of Holocaust testimony and as an art object by making use of the relative

⁴⁵ Alan Moore, *Watchmen*, illus. Dave Gibbons (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2014), [39].

possibilities of text and image and engaging with the comics-trope of “funny animals,” as well as more generally with the visual fantasticism that is available to the comics medium. *Watchmen*, like *Maus*, utilizes the nuances of the text/image relationship that is available to its medium. Unlike *Maus*, however, *Watchmen* is more overtly concerned with troubling the social space that occupied by the tradition of comics, and engaging critically with their oft-overlooked or overtly maligned potential.

Watchmen defines its literary identity in part by subversive use of some of the most maligned aspects of both the comics medium and tradition: the superhero trope and the use of images as a narrative tool. Characters in *Watchmen* cope with their chaotic world by trying to impose upon it the rigid and simplistic moral framework of the superhero trope. The eventual and inevitable failure of this trope to organize and explain the complex moral gray areas of the dilemmas faced by the characters represents a break from the traditional arch of the superhero narrative. The failure of frameworks casts the characters into spaces of uncertainty and dread, though each character responds differently to these failures. It is the way in which this uncertainty is handled by the character Rorschach, which ultimately functions to reveal the truly sinister problem of framework, and ultimately to implicate the audience in the failings he proposes.

Where initially images in *Watchmen* may appear to be subject to the gaze of the viewer, Rorschach’s visual presence in the text troubles this understanding, demanding that the viewer not merely passively consume, but actively participate in the self-examination the work is defined by. This break is representative of an impulse reminiscent of the conventions of twentieth century literary fiction discussed in the Introduction to this project: the desire to enable

involvement or implication in the text on the part of the viewer.⁴⁶ *Watchmen*'s characters fail to fit the problems of their world into the binary superhero frameworks they attempt to employ in order to cope with the darkness around them. The thematic resonance and moral considerations of this failure of the superhero trope acts in combination with Rorschach's visual presence, which functions to invert the gaze and implicate the audience. The result of this interplay between form and theme embodies the self-consciousness and focus on the subjective nature of experience and meaning-making which defines the unique literary identity of *Watchmen* as a representative of the tense cross section between literary concerns and descendancy from comics.

The superhero trope in comics has long represented a somewhat stunted binary, which has been referenced by some critics as one of the stumbling blocks in the argument for the legitimacy of comics. Superheroes are, by nature, simplistic tropes which belie the difficulty and internality associated with highbrow considerations. Isaac Cates comments in his article "On the Literary Uses of Superheroes, or, Batman and Superman Fistfight in Heaven" that "for most of the artists making claims for the power and potential of the graphic novel, American comic books' long entanglement with the superhero genre is something of an embarrassment."⁴⁷ Cates attributes this "embarrassment" to the historical association of Superhero comics with childhood and adolescence, pointing to what many critics view as the highly stylized, perhaps "unnaturalistic" nature of the genre. In the words of Santiago Ramos, simply put, when we think of Superheroes, we think of "kitsch" and "trash,"⁴⁸ and the cheap, commercial trappings of a genre

⁴⁶ A state of affairs which recalls the implication of the viewer in *Maus*, as discussed in the last chapter.

⁴⁷ Isaac Cates, "On the Literary Use of Superheroes; Or, Batman and Superman Fistfight in Heaven," *American Literature* 83, no. 4 (2011): [831], Academic Search Premier.

⁴⁸ Santiago Ramos, "The Superhero and His People," *Image Journal* 63 (2015): [15], Academic Search Premier.

reliant on an audience not typically attributed with much capacity for complex engagement with their sources of entertainment.

Charles Hatfield outlines the origins of this phenomenon in *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, asserting a parallel between the historical role of the superhero and the commercially driven comics establishment. In many ways the superhero is consummately identified with the tradition of comics, one almost operating as a stand-in for the other; the superhero, like the comic book, representing not much more than a simple one-dimensional creature easily marketed to children.⁴⁹ As discussed in the Introduction, the mass culture of traditional comic books stands in opposition to the conventions of high art as identified by critics like Clement Greenberg, who points to commercially-driven public appeal as being the hallmarks of “kitsch” and “low brow art.”⁵⁰ Though *Watchmen* constructs its identity around its roots in this medium which relies on the trappings of “kitsch,” it is the self-conscious troubling of this institution as a comfortingly simplistic reaction to times of historical turmoil and human suffering elevates its concerns to embody those of twentieth century literary fiction.

The historical role of the comic book superhero bears close ties to times of upheaval, turmoil and war, perhaps most concretely to the Second World War. Critic Ramzi Fawaz characterizes the implications of this connection: “with its inception in the late 1930’s, the superhero quickly became a popular national icon that wedded a fantasy of seemingly unlimited physical power to an ethical impulse to deploy one’s abilities in the service of maintaining public law and order.”⁵¹ The language Fawaz uses is telling: the superhero is an icon, a representation or symbol, of this heady possession of power in the face of uncomplicated “evil.” Fawaz and

⁴⁹ Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. N.P.: U of Mississippi, 2005. Print.

⁵⁰ Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), [10].

⁵¹ Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2016), [4-5].

Hatfield both point to the unrest, uncertainty, and atrocity of the second World War as having a clear role in the emergence of the superhero trope, pointing to figures like Captain America, who literally fought against Nazis in the pages of his comics, as evidence of this connection.⁵² The emergence of the superhero in times of existential turmoil like war indicates the fundamental desire of the public to cope with complicated issues through uncomplicated frameworks like that provided by the superhero trope.

Watchmen presents its own fictional “history” of the emergence of superheroes grounded in this real historical connection between the emergence of the comic book superhero and the rise of World War II. In his in-world biography, *Under the Hood*, Hollis Mason, one of the founding superheroes of the world of *Watchmen*, presents this in-world history. He cites the fact that he and his compatriots chose to “dress up in gaudy opera costumes and express the notion of good and evil in simple, childish terms, while over in Europe they were turning human beings into soap and lampshades.”⁵³ Mason’s presentation of the rise of “superheroes” here parallels and acknowledges the real-world historical emergence of comic book superheroes, portraying the decision to don the mask as a search for a simpler construction of morality than that provided by the real-world (and *Watchmen*-world) moral difficulty of the Holocaust.

Mason explains that “the world of Doc Savage and The Shadow was one of absolute values, where what was good was never in the slightest doubt and where what was evil inevitably suffered some fitting punishment...”⁵⁴ In his emphasis here on the appeal of the moral binary of these two real-world comic superheroes, Mason seeks to explain the impetus and appeal of masked vigilantism. Mason indicates that the superhero provides a simplistic moral

⁵² Fawaz, *The New Mutants*, [4].

⁵³ Moore, *Watchmen*, [39].

⁵⁴ Moore, *Watchmen*, [39].

framework through which to understand a world that can, especially in times of great upheaval and moral breakdown like WWII, feel so complicated as to invoke a sense of helplessness.

Simply put: the superhero helps the characters of *Watchmen* make sense of a senseless world.

Historical reality in *Watchmen* mirrors historical reality in real-world America, up until the point where people begin to don the mask and emerge as superheroes. This would indicate that the alternative historical reality presented by *Watchmen* functions as an imagining of the way real-world history may have come to pass if people truly had been inspired to don the mask themselves, in the way that the characters do in the narrative. This connection between the emergence of comic book superheroes in the real-world, and masked vigilantes in the world of *Watchmen*, indicates the text's preoccupation with the use of the superhero trope as a framing device used by the characters to cope with the chaos of their world, in parallel to the use of the superhero in real-world comics to cope with the chaos and uncertainty of our world. *Watchmen* asks why attempting to fulfill the superhero role is something anyone would desire to do, a question which implicitly complicates the role of the superhero by asking what it is about the role that appeals to "human nature" in some way.

Characters in *Watchmen* make use of the superhero trope as a coping framework all throughout the text, but no two characters are more guilty of this than Laurie Juspezyk and Dan Dreiberg. Juspezyk and Dreiberg, the two examples of "second generation" superheroes who critically took up their names and personas from heroes who came before,⁵⁵ are the least critically aware of their use of the superhero persona as a coping framework, and are thus, in some ways, the best examples of this phenomenon. Laurie and Dan long for an easier world, and

⁵⁵ Laurie Juspezyk was groomed all her life to eventually take on her mother's old superhero persona, becoming the new "Silk Spectre" at sixteen. Dan Dreiberg was a fan of Hollis Mason's "Nite Owl" and wrote to ask if he could take on the persona after Mason retired.

the effect of this longing manifests itself physically and emotionally in ways the characters are not aware of. Highly illustrative of this unconscious reliance on framework is the incident where Laurie and Dan have sex in Dan's airship after saving people stranded in a burning tenement building. Laurie and Dan, out for a pleasure cruise in the airship, come across the burning building and decide to rescue the people trapped inside, though they have been forcibly retired from their superherodom by a government mandate some years earlier.

The indicators of superherodom as a device for simplification in this scene are primarily tied to the sexual undertone of this action of heroism for Laurie and Dan. Just prior to this scene, the couple attempt to engage sexually, but fail due to Dan's impotence. The implication of the text is that this impotence is brought about by the tenuous and existentially fraught global situation of the text. The United States is on the brink of nuclear war with the USSR, and reminders of this blare from the TV as Dan and Laurie attempt to have sex: an advertisement which promises "fruity fallout and a delicious molten center. They'll blow you all the way to China."⁵⁶

In the direct aftermath of saving the lives of the people trapped in the tenement, however, Dan's impotence is miraculously cured. The page portrays a passionate embrace, glimpses of disrobing, all culminating in an image of Laurie's elbow hitting a button, resulting in the highly suggestive last scene of the page, wherein the airship, viewed from afar, shoots a column of flame out of its in-board flamethrower (a fairly transparent allegory for male ejaculation).⁵⁷ The action of the narrative then moves directly to the aftermath of the implied intercourse, where a nude Laurie asks: "Dan, was tonight good? Did you like it?" After Dan replies in the affirmative,

⁵⁶ Moore, *Watchmen*, [227].

⁵⁷ Moore, *Watchmen*, [239].

Laurie asks, in reference to the fact that they had been wearing their old superhero apparel during both the rescue and the sex: “Did the costumes make it good?”⁵⁸

Both affirm that the costumes did indeed add to their enjoyment of the experience. Dan explains that the costumes made him feel “so confident it’s like I’m on fire. And all the mask killers, all the wars in the world, they’re just cases, just problems to solve.” This comment indicates that for Dan, as for Hollis before him, superherodom represents a simplification of issues and problems down to simple, conquerable “cases.” The moral complexity of war becomes nothing more than a “problem to solve.” The fact that Laurie initiates sex immediately following this action of superheroism, the fact that Dan’s impotence is magically “cured,” and the fact that both of their sexual appetites are so heightened by this action that they see fit to mention it afterward, indicates that both Dan and Laurie derive some kind of erotic stimulus from their actions of heroism. The connection between this “simplification of issues” and the sexual satisfaction experienced by Dan and Laurie indicates the role of superherodom as a coping mechanism for these characters. Without the clarifying framework of the superhero trope’s moral binary to create distance between them and the suffocating chaos of their world, they are consumed by existential anxiety and rendered impotent: fundamentally incapable of functioning.

But the circumstances of *Watchmen* do not allow the characters to reside comfortably in this framework for long. In the moment of crisis at the end of the narrative, the cracks in the ease and simplicity of the superhero framework manifest themselves violently. Former-superhero mastermind “Ozymandias,” Millionaire-Olympian and oft-proclaimed “smartest man alive” Adrian Veidt, constructs an impossible moral predicament. Veidt reasons that the only way to

⁵⁸ Moore, *Watchmen*, [240].

avoid nuclear holocaust, and the resultant annihilation of the entire human race, is to fabricate an alien attack on New York City, wiping out half the population in one fell swoop, but also uniting the United States and the USSR in common fear of alien invasion. Laurie and Dan are forced to make what seems to be an impossible choice. Having uncovered Veidt's plan (though they discover it too late to prevent it from taking place) the characters must choose whether or not they will expose the hoax, and Veidt.

Veidt reasons with them: "Will you expose me, undoing the peace millions died for? Kill me, risking subsequent investigation? Morally, you're in checkmate..."⁵⁹ For Dr. Manhattan, a non-human whose god-like powers render human concerns somewhat trivial in his estimation, the answer is fairly simple: "Logically, I'm afraid, he's right, Exposing this plot, we destroy any chance of peace, dooming earth to worse destruction... If we would preserve life here, we must remain silent."⁶⁰ To Dr. Manhattan, the moral answer is clear and unemotional. But for Dan and Laurie, the answer is not so simple, existing in defiance of their desire to continue viewing the world through the "good and evil" moral framework of the superhero trope. Dan asks: "How can humans make decisions like this? We're damned if we stay quiet, Earth's damned if we don't."⁶¹ In the face of such a complex and non-binary moral question, the superhero framework fails, abandoning the characters who rely on it in their moment of greatest moral need. Dan and Laurie cry frustrated, heartbroken tears over the impossible choice they must make, realizing that their framework has failed in the face of a problem that defies the strictures of the "good vs. evil" construct of the superhero.

⁵⁹ Moore, *Watchmen*, [402].

⁶⁰ Moore, *Watchmen*, [402].

⁶¹ Moore, *Watchmen*, [402].

Where Dan and Laurie ultimately decide that they must keep silent to preserve humanity from nuclear armageddon, Rorschach responds to Ozymandias's assertion that they are in checkmate with: "No. Not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise."⁶² Even faced with the prospect of incineration at the hands of Dr. Manhattan to prevent him from telling the world of what has taken place, Rorschach knowingly, even willingly, dies rather than compromising. The crucial difference between Rorschach and Laurie and Dan resides in their relationship to the superhero framework. Where Laurie and Dan are not conscious of their reliance on the trope as a coping mechanism, Rorschach takes ownership of the trope, as is made clear in his series of interactions with psychologist Malcolm Butler. The way in which image is employed in combination with Rorschach's text-based assertion of autonomy and power serves to trouble the relationship of audience to viewed object. The inversion of gaze consequently implicates the viewer in the very adherence to framework that breaks down for Dan and Laurie. The implications of Rorschach's pictorial characterization bear unpacking. Rorschach's mask, which he refers to as his "face" and without which he exhibits extreme agitation,⁶³ is a piece of latex cloth which presents ever shifting blobs of ink, obscuring his whole face from view, as can be seen in this image, the first in the text where Rorschach's "face" is visible.

⁶² Moore, *Watchmen*, [402].

⁶³ Moore, *Watchmen*. [172]



Alan Moore, *Watchmen*, illus. Dave Gibbons
(Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2014), [14].

Rorschach, both in the personal preference of his character, as well as in the way that he is constantly depicted through images, is deeply entwined with this visual device. By dint of *Watchmen*'s medium, Rorschach is not merely *described* as a figure with a Rorschach test for a face, he is depicted that way. The visual element of this presentation necessitates that the audience is confronted with a constantly shifting bevy of Rorschach images every time he appears.

In this way, Rorschach's "face" demands self-consciousness from the viewer. The Rorschach image is massively recognizable, and often referenced as a culturally colloquial stand in for psychotherapy; as NPR's *All Thing Considered* puts it "These days, you're more likely to come across the concept of a Rorschach test in a cultural context than a clinical one."⁶⁴ The mass-recognizability of the image, and the strong cultural connotations it possesses thus indicate

⁶⁴ NPR Staff, "How Hermann Rorschach's 'Inkblots' Took On A Life Of Their Own," *NPR*, February 17, 2017.

that the depiction of Rorschach functions as a confrontation of the viewer. Rorschach's face constantly presenting Rorschach images suggests its function as a constant Rorschach test, being administered to the viewer at all times when his face is visible.

According to Irving Weiner of the University of South Florida, the Rorschach Inkblot Method "serves as means of measuring and describing various aspects of personality functioning."⁶⁵ Most basically, the Rorschach is a series of cards, created when ink is applied to an piece of paper which is then folded over to create a mirror image of itself.⁶⁶ The images are presented to an individual who is then invited to share their associations with the image, the ultimate ethos being that "[b]y asking the person to tell you what they see in the inkblot, they are actually telling you about themselves, and how they project meaning onto the real world."⁶⁷ The Rorschach test thus effectively inverts the responsibility of making meaning from the images, which traditionally bear the expectation of presenting symbolic representation (as outlined in chapter one), onto the viewer. This characterization throws *Watchmen*'s Rorschach into a position of representing the subversion of the relationship of viewer (audience) to viewed (image) within the text of *Watchmen* itself.

Rorschach's presence in the text as a constant confrontation of the audience results in the implication of the viewer in the dark and troubling observations he makes about the world. In the chapter significantly titled "The Abyss Gazes Also," psychoanalyst Malcolm Butler is charged with the task of rehabilitating Rorschach after he is arrested. The doctor sets about to "fix" Rorschach. Initially well meaning, but perhaps naive concerning the state of his charge, Butler

⁶⁵ Irving B. Weiner, "The Rorschach Inkblot Method (RIM) Is Not a Test: Implications for Theory and Practice," *Journal of Personality Assessment* 62, no. 3 (1994): [498], Academic Search Premier.

⁶⁶ BBC News Staff, "What's behind the Rorschach inkblot test?," *BBC News Magazine* (United Kingdom), July 25, 2012, accessed March 12, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-18952667>.

⁶⁷ BBC News Staff, "What's behind."

soon experiences the same inversion of gaze which Rorschach inflicts upon the audience. In this way, Butler's experience becomes something of an allegory for the indictment of the audience in the troubling subscription to framework that is one of the main focuses of the text.

Butler remarks that Rorschach is "[p]hysically... fascinatingly ugly. I could stare at him for hours... Except that he stares back, which I find uncomfortable... Nevertheless, I'm convinced I can help him. No problem is beyond the grasp of a good psychoanalyst, and they tell me I'm very good. Good with people."⁶⁸ The unnerving presence of Rorschach's stare, or gaze, is referenced throughout Butler's narrative, suggesting the discomfort or inherent wrongness of being subjected to it. But Butler's confidence that he will be able to "fix" Rorschach is immediately suggested, by the accompanying images, as being misplaced. Butler presents Rorschach with the Rorschach inkblot images:

⁶⁸ Moore, *Watchmen*, [179].



Alan Moore, *Watchmen*, illus. Dave Gibbons
(Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2014), [179].

The sequence of images here, placed in relationship to the remarks of Dr. Butler, underline the doctor's misguidedness. Consider the images: the frame of Rorschach looking at the inkblot image, followed immediately by the image of the dead dog, overlaid with the doctor's query: "What can you see?" This combination of image and question visually insinuates that this violent figure is the first which occurs to Rorschach when he looks at the inkblot. The next thing Rorschach says is thus visually presented as a lie; Rorschach claims to see "a pretty butterfly," when it has just been clearly suggested that what he saw was the dead dog.

Dr. Butler, however, falls for the lie, remarking that Rorschach's "responses to the Rorschach Blot Tests were surprisingly bright and positive and healthy."⁶⁹ This naivety

⁶⁹ Moore, *Watchmen*, [179].

demonstrates the doctor's initial allegiance to a simplistic moral framework. Though Butler does not subscribe to the superhero framework, his status as a psychoanalyst, particularly one who constantly references "curing" his patients, or "making them well" demonstrates a concurrent adherence to framework. After his first interaction with Rorschach, Dr. Butler is shown sitting at home finishing his notes about the meeting. His wife comes to the door. She makes some inconsequential remark, asking about "Rorschach." Dr. Butler corrects her, stating "Not Rorschach, Walter Kovacs. Rorschach is an unhealthy fantasy personality."⁷⁰ The distance Butler is able to create for himself from the darkness of Rorschach's worldview is indicated by the doctor's somewhat smug detachment from Rorschach. This comfort is indicative of the doctor's own coping framework; a framework which will ultimately crumble as Rorschach permeates and undermines the doctor's worldview.

The next day, Rorschach and Butler meet again. Rorschach refuses to passively bear the gaze of the doctor. In juxtaposition to the misleadingly dull passivity he had presented the previous day, Rorschach follows Dr. Butler's request to "talk about Rorschach" with a blunt "I don't like you."⁷¹ The doctor is flustered and disturbed by this, as indicated by his response:

⁷⁰ Moore, *Watchmen*, [186].

⁷¹ Moore, *Watchmen*, [187].



Alan Moore, *Watchmen*, illus. Dave Gibbons
(Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2014), [187].

From this moment forward, the doctor's conception of Rorschach as object to be viewed and analyzed is upended. With this one simple phrase, Rorschach precipitates a profound unrest for the doctor. The lines radiating from his head indicate shock; the doctor's face does not merely seem to indicate mere fluster or hurt. It seems an overreaction for the doctor to be rendered totally derailed by this one fairly innocuous statement. The upset comes not from the words themselves but from their implications of this statement for the doctor's organizational framework. Butler's previous statements indicate fairly clearly that he has an understanding of Rorschach as not much more than a sick man who he can save through the power of sensible psychoanalysis. This estimation, which assumes that Rorschach is in some way powerless and vulnerable, needing Butler to save him, is toppled by this comment. As the relationship between the two men continues, and Rorschach begins to tell his story, the resultant drastic shift in Dr. Butler's perception of Rorschach begins to rapidly undermine his psychoanalyst-savior framework. By dint of the fact of Rorschach's visual characterization and the continual meta-presence of the Rorschach test which is being administered to Rorschach over the course of these

interactions, the doctor's shift in perception acts as an allegory for the audience's relationship to these events.

Rorschach begins to tell Butler about how he "became" Rorschach. As Rorschach continues with his story, the doctor never regains the comfortable "neutrality" he presented in the first interaction. Initially he was a psychologist, un-implicated in the darkness of the world presented by Rorschach except as potentially the person who might be able to cure him of his notions. Rorschach refuses his perceived role as object of study by returning Butler's gaze vehemently. First, he asks the doctor "Why are you spending so much time with me?" and then, after Butler responds that it's because he "cares about" Rorschach and "wants to make [him] well," Rorschach retaliates. "Other people, down in cells. Behavior more extreme than mine. You don't spend any time with them... But then, they're not famous. Won't get your name in the journals. You don't want to make me well. Just want to know what makes me sick."⁷²

Rorschach's words bite: they are true, the doctor previously referenced in his journal the desire for the recognition which might result from his treatment of Rorschach. The truth of these statements undermines the Doctor's understanding of himself in his own framework. He is not merely the savior, because he also unconsciously acts out of self-interest. He fights valiantly to retain the distance granted him by his status as observer, but cracks begin to show around the edges.

Fighting with his wife, who insinuates that he's spending too much time on the Rorschach case at the cost of their relationship, Butler mistakenly refers to Rorschach as "Rorschach," immediately correcting himself to "Kovacs. Not Rorschach." Butler even goes so far as to admitting at the end of the sequence that Rorschach is "absolutely right" in saying that

⁷² Moore, *Watchmen*, [189].

Butler is “locked up in [prison] with [him].”⁷³ All of these actions are symptomatic of Rorschach’s infiltration of Butler’s overly simplistic, perhaps overly optimistic view of the relationship between them. Rather than accepting his status as object of study, Rorschach inverts the gaze back onto Butler. It is clear from these symptomatic episodes that Butler’s perception is being infiltrated by Rorschach. But the final scene between the two men is the final straw for Butler, serving to upend the doctor’s framework, the device through which he constructs both his world view and view of himself.

Dr. Butler once more presents Rorschach with the same Rorschach image he had immediately presented him with. Rorschach tells the doctor he’s seen it before. Butler answers that he “thought [Rorschach] might have been holding back before,”⁷⁴ indicating that the doctor may now be breaking out of the confines of his simplistic and structured framework as he succumbs further and further to Rorschach’s prompting. This time, Rorschach tells him the truth, saying that he sees a dog, dead, with its head split down the middle, the image that was revealed to the audience in the first interaction between the two men. The doctor asks who split the dog’s head in half, precipitating the revelation of Rorschach’s story of what transformed him from Walter Kovacs into Rorschach.

The story basically involves the kidnap and murder of a six-year-old girl. Much of the story is related only through images, a device which underlines the role of Rorschach as a visual indicator of the position of the audience/viewer in making meaning in *Watchmen*.

⁷³ Moore, *Watchmen*, [191].

⁷⁴ Moore, *Watchmen*, [195].



Alan Moore, *Watchmen*, illus. Dave Gibbons
(Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2014), [197].

The nonverbal nature of this scene, particularly in light of the symbolic resonance of Rorschach's face, requires the viewer to make connections and formulate meaning in a much different way than does a description using words. The first image in this sequence shows Rorschach's gloved hand opening the door; this, in combination with the perspective of the image, indicates that we are viewing the scene either through Rorschach's eyes, or at least from his perspective. The perspective then shifts, revealing Rorschach's "face" as he gestures at the incinerator. The perspective shifts again, we are looking over Rorschach's shoulder as he searches through the ash, once more brought into the action. Then, the all-important conclusion: we are shown the little girl's underwear head on, alongside a clear view of Rorschach's face. The shifts in perspective here signal the inclusion of the audience in this scene. Rorschach's hand in the first image works in tandem with the fact that we look over his shoulder in the third to make the viewer aware of their own perspective, and the relationship of that perspective to the action that is occurring. When we are then faced with the evidence of this profound human evil, the murder of a little girl, alongside the confrontational image of Rorschach's face, the audience is forced to consider, not only our presence in the narrative, but the process of ascribing meaning to these images, which the audience necessarily partakes in. The role of subjectivity in *Watchmen* is

thus highlighted, as well as the implications of our inclusion in this narrative. The fact that the audience, like Dr. Butler, may not be the mere consumers/observers we imagine ourselves to be, demands that the words Rorschach says next are viewed in the context of the self, and not merely of the characters in *Watchmen*.

Rorschach thus reveals to Dr. Butler why he shed the identity of Walter Kovacs to become Rorschach. In the wake of the incident with the mistaken murder of the little girl whose underwear he found in the incinerator, Rorschach explains:

Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long, no meaning save what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces. It is not God who kills the children. Not fate that butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It's us. Only us.⁷⁵

This argument is superimposed first over a close-up of the Rorschach test card on the table between the two men, and then over a more distant image of the card on the table, indicating the connection between the test and the words being spoken by Rorschach. This ethos presented by Rorschach fundamentally troubles the institution of frameworks, like Dan and Laurie's reliance on the superhero trope or Dr. Butler's reliance on the psychologist's role. His assertion is that the world is chaotic, and that we are fools to believe that we can explain the world through frameworks like God or Fate. Rorschach purports that all of us, not merely the characters of this text, are fooling ourselves.

Rorschach's visual presence, in combination with his assertions here, indicates through the device of the Rorschach test, that all experience is subjective and individual; that meaning we see in the images presented to us is nothing more than a symptom of the frameworks of

⁷⁵ Moore, *Watchmen*, [204].

understanding that we impose on a world that fundamentally defies systematization. As Dan Dreiberg needs the complex and nuanced issues of the world to be reduced to the “cases” of a superhero in order to function sexually, so Rorschach indicates, do we all ultimately require these frameworks in order to cope with the world around us. But Rorschach’s very existence constructs an alternative to this reliance on framework, if one that is perhaps impossibly harsh. In the same way that he inverts the gaze in his relationship to Dr. Butler, Rorschach advises that people must examine their relationships to the frameworks through which they understand the world. “Streets stank of fire. The void breathed hard on my heart, turning its illusions to ice, shattering them. Was reborn then. Free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world.”⁷⁶ Rorschach here asserts the agency of the individual to create their own moral understanding as the ultimate freedom from preexisting moral frameworks. He asserts that he has the power to “scrawl [his] own design,” he is not an object to be viewed, he is an agent of his own creation. Rorschach does not accept that God or Fate or even the moral institution of the superhero trope have power over him because of their perceived power. Rorschach rather asserts that each person must take agency over the gaze asserted on them, and must, in so doing, create and enforce their own moral understanding on the world.

The Rorschach test was born of a German game called Klecksographie, where the object was to collect inkblot images from stores and make associations and stories from them.⁷⁷

Hermann Rorschach, who loved the game as a child, noticed in the wake of playing the game with people who had been diagnosed with schizophrenia that answers and associations varied from the usual answers given by un-afflicted persons. This observation grew into the use of the

⁷⁶ Moore, *Watchmen*, [204].

⁷⁷ BBC News Staff, "What's behind."

concept of the game as a psychological test. The game was a mass-produced phenom, predominantly played by children.

In this way, the life of the Rorschach test mirrors the life of the comic book, at least in terms of presentation within the text of *Watchmen*. *Watchmen* presents both the Rorschach test, and the medium of comics as frameworks, initially light and juvenile and carefree, but ultimately objects which become useful in what Rorschach presents as the necessary role of the viewer: to make meaning. The Rorschach test alone is meaningless; it is blots on paper. But when it is employed unexpectedly, as is the case in *Watchmen*, to represent an inversion of gaze, it becomes an object through which the viewer can better understand their role in the media they are consuming. In the same way, comics, as a medium which rely in large part on images to relate story or meaning, are granted inversion by the implicit comparison drawn between them and the Rorschach test.

If the character of Rorschach can be understood as the device through which the viewer understands, and is invited to take agency over their relationship to, the text, several things become clear. As previously noted, the superhero trope in *Watchmen* acts a framework through which characters attempt to make sense of, and cope with, an insensible world. This construction does not, however, function as a denunciation of the trope itself. Rather, the emotionally fraught circumstances faced by the characters, when shown in contrast to the empty nihilism of Rorschach, presents something of an impossible choice to the viewer: do we accept our frameworks, though they are flawed, like Laurie and Dan? Or do we reject them and perhaps risk losing our fundamental humanity like Rorschach? The confrontation of the gaze inversion we are presented with does not allow us to eschew the choice, because *Watchmen* refuses to be an object that is gazed at by a passive observer. *Watchmen* gazes also.

Through the effectiveness of this use of image, *Watchmen* demonstrates that engagement with its comics roots does not relegate it to the level of juvenile pulp, but rather indicates its legitimacy as a literary text. *Watchmen* makes use of two of the most maligned of the storytelling devices historically associated with comics: the superhero trope, and the concept of telling a story with images, and flips the script on them. Subversively, in so doing, it creates itself a new literary identity in line with the subjectivity and self-consciousness expected of a work embodying the conventions of twentieth century literary fiction. In fact, the way in which *Watchmen* employs these storytelling devices, defines the graphic novel as a medium which both expects and demands that the relationship between object and viewer be considered and troubled, and leaves the viewer with the impression that their associations and assumptions of comics may have greater implications than they at first expected or believed.

Chapter Three

Dark Knight Ascendant:

Comics Identity and the “Inventive Grace” of Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*

In the previous two chapters, I outlined the manner in which Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Moore’s *Watchmen* interact with their history and medium in order to ultimately carve a niche outside of the designation of comics. *Maus* and *Watchmen* do not identify themselves within the tradition of comics; in fact, they defy placement within this tradition. Though they implement the recognizable conventions of the tradition and medium of comics, each work alienates itself from the tradition of comics. These works make use of vestiges of the tradition, and though their form is that of the medium, these elements are ultimately subverted, commented on, and shaped by focus on the “higher order” concerns of twentieth century literary fiction. Broadly, though in vastly different ways and with vastly different ends, the convergence of subjective experience and form is what defines the identity of the works.

As discussed in the Introduction to this project, Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, the auspicious third of the “1986 Big Three,” is often referenced alongside the other two as a work which somehow questions or troubles its classification within either literature or comics. As referenced, the winning of the Pulitzer by *Maus* in combination with the “darker, grittier”⁷⁸ narratives of *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight* represented such a profound break from the popular

⁷⁸ Nicki D. Phillips and Staci Strobel, ““Crime Doesn’t Pay”: A Brief History Of Crime and Justice Themes in Comic Books,” in *Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and the American Way* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2013), [36], JSTOR.

understanding of the tradition of comics as to incite the rise of the new designating terminology of “graphic novel.”

Though Spiegelman and other creators express discomfort or ambivalence with the term graphic novel and with the underlying implications surrounding the desire of the viewing public for a perceived “respectability,” *Maus* and *Watchmen* both necessitate some differentiation from what came before them, regardless of concerns about the semantics of the term. *Maus* and *Watchmen* fulfill the crucial necessity of the graphic novel: they are works that use existing conventions of comics for their own ends, asserting the primacy of “higher order” concerns. *Maus* makes use of the visual fantasticism available to comics in order to ask challenging questions about the difficulty of relating experience and about how this difficulty shapes the communication of truth; its primary aim is to make use of these conventions in order to achieve these ends. In some profound way it is a work which defies the reader to see it as “merely” a comic. So too does Moore’s *Watchmen* implicitly place itself outside the tradition of comics as a work which so deeply troubles the convention of the “superhero,” perhaps one of the most defining elements of the tradition, by implicating the audience in the capacity of the trope to act as a tool of obfuscation.

Miller’s *Dark Knight*, though so often identified alongside these two works, does not seek or necessitate status outside of the designation of comics. Rather, it resides within this designation. *Dark Knight* participates in the phenomenon described by critic Peregrine Dace as the way in which “popular or genre fiction” finds “its own inventive grace”: by engagement with the “shared and shifting rules and conventions” of the tradition and medium themselves, rather than in the manipulation of traditional comics-devices by literary concerns.⁷⁹ *Dark Knight*, unlike

⁷⁹ Peregrine Dace, “Nietzsche Contra Superman: An Examination of the Work of Frank Miller,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (2007): [98], Academic Search Premier.

Maus or *Watchmen*, does not merely reference its connections to the medium of comics; rather, it asserts its place within that tradition. Thus, *The Dark Knight Returns* is not, as such, a graphic novel. It is a comic, but one which subverts the traditional understanding of what comics can do; not by manipulation of its traditional qualities, but by participation in the tradition itself. *Dark Knight*'s assertion of its identity as comic allows it to engage in the "shared and shifting rules and conventions" of comics, and even to assert its own shifts, as is the right of an object which belongs within this designation. Though *Dark Knight* achieves engagement with higher order concerns, including commentary on its own medium and the handling of difficult moral questions without providing any clear answers, it does so through assertion of itself as a comic. Thus, the *Dark Knight* attests to the specific literary potential of works which subscribe to the tradition of comics.

As established, *The Dark Knight Returns* is a comic. However, further than that assertion, it is a *Batman* comic. The nature of comics creation is a deeply collaborative process, particularly in the case of the superhero comic, and even more particularly in the case of iconic superheroes like Batman. As is pointed out by Paul Crutcher in his article "Complexity in the Comic and Graphic Novel Medium: Inquiry Through Bestselling Batman Stories," the comic book, unlike many other artistic forms, is often a profoundly collaborative medium. Crutcher uses the example of one particular comic, *Batman Knightsfall*, to illustrate this, pointing out that "[w]hile no authors are listed anywhere on the covers or spine, 16 people are given some authorship on the main title page. An additional 25 names make the copyright page..."⁸⁰

Obviously *Batman Knightsfall* is representative of a subset of comics not specifically owing their authorship to any one person or even a writing team, which, while not unusual, is

⁸⁰ Paul A. Crutcher, "Complexity in the Comic and Graphic Novel Medium: Inquiry Through Bestselling Batman Stories," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 1 (February 2011): [60], Academic Search Premier.

also not the paradigmatic state of affairs. The collaborative nature of comics goes far beyond the specific relationship between writer, illustrator, colorist, and etc. The collaborative creation of a figure like Batman is indicated by his long history of representation by many separate individuals, all of whom have both creative control over the character and restrictions inherent to the necessity of authentically rendering a culturally recognizable figure. In this way, participation in the creation of this American cultural icon acts as an allegory for *Dark Knight*'s position within the tradition of comics. *Dark Knight* has creative control over the ways in which it manifests the "rules and conventions" of comics, just as it has creative control over the ways in which it manifests the conventions of the Batman character, but it also must reside within these rules and conventions, or else risk inauthenticity.

Geoff Klock comments in his essay "'Frank Miller's New Batman and the Grotesque'" that "Miller's innovation is to avoid simply 'telling another Batman story'—he looks back at Batman's history and creates something that investigates, analyzes, synthesizes, and criticizes the history of his main character."⁸¹ Klock suggests that Miller's Batman serves as a synthesis, a word which denotes the quintessential distillation of a thing. Understanding Miller's Batman as principally representative figure of the character gives *Dark Knight* the power of authenticity. This representative quality works in tandem with the "shared and shifting" pursuits of investigation, analysis, and criticism.

The Dark Knight Returns presents the reader with Batman: the characterization, the objects, the storylines; all represented in this retelling in such a way as to undoubtedly assert the work's status as a comic. It is in *Dark Knight*'s subtle attention to the moral complexity of the canonically and iconically recognizable functions that the work defies the simplicity associated

⁸¹ Geoff Klock, "Frank Miller's New Batman and the Grotesque," in *Batman Unauthorized: Vigilantes, Jokers, and Heroes in Gotham City*, comp. Jake Black (Dallas, TX: Smart Pop, 2009), [42], ProQuest ebrary.

with the tradition within which it resides. It is through profound fulfillment of this tradition that *Dark Knight* finds its literary footing. *Dark Knight* is a work so fundamentally tied to the status of being a comic, that the sum of its literary identity becomes defined by “comic,” though it also espouses an attention to “higher order” concerns.

Batman’s multitude of iterations are part of what identify the character so strongly with the tradition of comics. Superheroes are deeply unique figures in entertainment media in that they are almost unilaterally collaboratively created. Typically a superhero is conceived by one creator, but because of contracting on the part of major comics companies (primarily Marvel Comics and DC Comics), the character is owned by the company rather than the creator.^{82, 83} Resultantly, companies who own the rights to big name characters like Batman (DC), have control over who can make stories using the character, thus creating a collaboratively rendered character who defies norms of authorship.

Determining what an “authentic” rendering of Batman entails requires the compilation of defining and canonical characteristics. It is these visual markers, traits, and storylines which allow a collaboratively created character to be identifiable and embody some kind of continuity. For Batman, authenticity begins with visual rendering. First invented by comics artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger in 1939, the Batman character boasts a long history, and many, many iterations. Critic Lou Anders comments that Kane is the person who deserves the most visual credit for the character, referencing Kane’s “crafting [of] an enduring iconography—the cowl,

⁸² Nicole J.S. Sudhindra, "Marvel's Superhero Licensing," *World Intellectual Property Organization Magazine*, June 2012, accessed April 3, 2017, http://www.wipo.int/wipo_magazine/en/2012/03/article_0005.html.

⁸³ In fact, Marvel Comics and DC co-own the copyright for the term “Super Hero,” a fact which is currently the subject of a legal battle between an independent comics creator, Ray Felix and Marvel and DC, over Felix’s right to name his comic “A World Without Superheroes”: Alex Eidman, "Comic book creator fights for right to use term 'Superhero'," *NY Daily News* (New York, NY), April 27, 2013, accessed April 3, 2017, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/comic-book-creator-fights-term-superhero-article-1.1327860>.

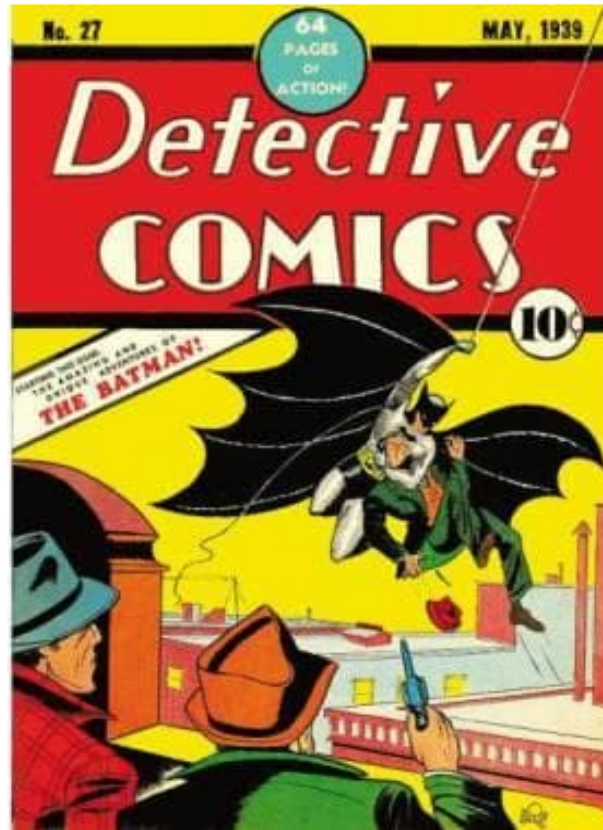
the cape, the cave, the car, the butler, the signal, the rogues gallery—that lasts and lends itself to a multitude of interpretations across the decades and now across the centuries.”⁸⁴ Visual indicators are essential to characterization in comics, because comics are an inherently visual medium. Recognizability is fundamental in the crafting of comics characters. This is particularly true of superheroes, who are not only identified by their costumes and accoutrements, but also signified by them. Costumes are a symbol of superherodom without which characters cannot represent their superhero personas; Batman is not Batman without his suit. It represents recognizability: as a character operating under a secret identity, the primary indication that Batman is indeed Batman, both for the audience as well as for the other characters, is his suit.

Finger and Kane’s original Batman first appeared in *Detective Comics #27*, dated May 1939.^{85, 86}

⁸⁴ Lou Anders, “Two of a Kind: Can the Team Behind *Batman Begins* Capture the Essence of the Joker?” in *Batman Unauthorized : Vigilantes, Jokers, and Heroes in Gotham City*, comp. Jake Black (Dallas, TX: Smart Pop, 2009), [42], ProQuest ebrary.

⁸⁵ O’Neil, Dennis, Leah Wilson, and Jake Black. *Batman Unauthorized*, edited by Dennis O’Neil, et al., BenBella Books, Inc., 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁸⁶ Interesting, the series *Detective Comics* would ultimately provide a name to the massive multimedia conglomerate DC Comics which grew out of the series, and which still owns the character of Batman to this day.



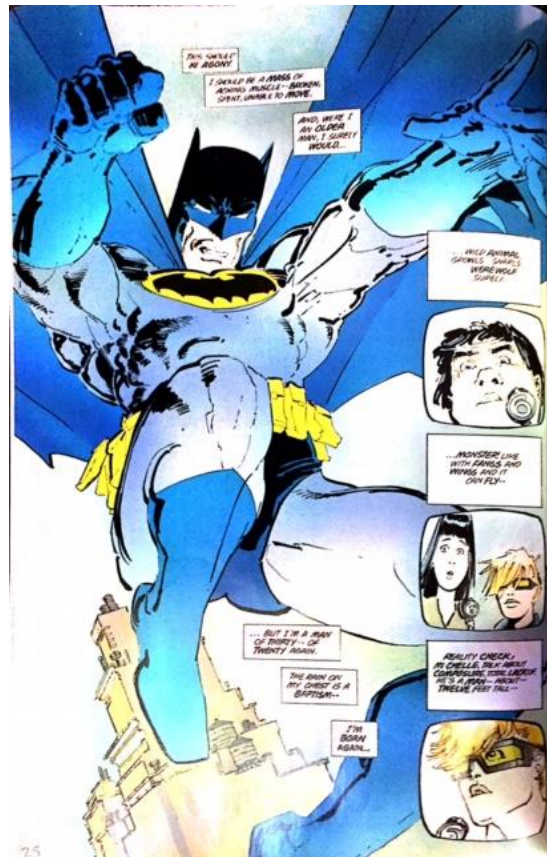
Telegraph Media Group, "The ten most valuable comic books in the world," *The Telegraph* (United Kingdom), February 24, 2013.⁸⁷

The classic signifiers of the character are all represented in this first image: the highly recognizable cowl with slitted eyes and pointed ears, coming down over Wayne's nose to cover the majority of his face; the oval logo with the iconic bat figure inside it (obscured here by the head of the villain Batman is apprehending, but present within the pages of the book); the billowing cape mimicking the look of wings; the gloves; the tights; the boots; the utility belt, complete with the objects and gadgets which act as part of Batman's "superpowers." Though of course the costume has been reimagined over iterations—with subtle shifts in color, silhouette, and presence or absence of utility belt—these initial indicators form the standard from which all

⁸⁷ Full Citation: Telegraph Media Group, "The ten most valuable comic books in the world," *The Telegraph* (United Kingdom), February 24, 2013, accessed April 19, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/mediatechnologyandtelecoms/media/7303113/The-ten-most-valuable-comic-books-in-the-world.html>.

subsequent iterations diverge. These alterations are governed by the task of each new creator: to signify Batman convincingly enough to purport to represent him.

Miller's Batman wears a very recognizable, not particularly deviant rendition of this classic ensemble:



Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns 30th Anniversary Edition*
(Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2016), [25].

Clearly Miller's Batman is aesthetically aligned with Kane and Finger's original. Though there are slight differences in coloration (Miller's Batman is colored with blue rather than black), the general formula is followed: the familiar cowl, the billowing cape, the boots, the gloves, the yellow oval logo with the iconic bat logo. Miller's close allegiance to the original costume of

Batman where other versions have strayed,⁸⁸ underlines the importance of authenticity to *Dark Knight*. Where other renditions of Batman have moved fairly far from the Kane original, Miller's Batman is in many ways nearly identically signified.

Dark Knight's portrayal of the costume as quite traditional provides more space for the comic to explore its "inventive grace," stretching the rules and conventions of comics by commenting somewhat critically on the traditional elements of the costume. Soon after his reemergence, Batman is fighting crime, and is shot in the chest. The bullet bounces off, prompting explanation:



Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns 30th Anniversary Edition* (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2016), [42].

⁸⁸ Examples include: Christopher Nolan's Batman, who notably omits any color differential at all, as well as choosing to extricate the Bat Logo from inside an oval shape, choosing instead to represent Batman's symbol as a raised relief on the character's chest. This phenom can also be observed in the popular children's cartoon Batman Beyond, which elongates the character's ears and makes the logo on the chest red rather than the traditional black-inside-yellow-oval.

After being shot, Batman comments: “magnum load has to be--hits me like a freight train--the plate holds--why do you think I wear a target on my chest--can’t armor my head...”⁸⁹ This revelation changes the entire relationship of character to costume. Where previously the costume acted as both emblem of superhero status and as custodian of secret identity, the specific *function* of the costume was not necessarily critically examined or explained. Batman here almost seems to mock the inutility of his garb, making light of the absurdity of having a “target” on his chest. He actually *comments* on the more outrageously impractical elements of his suit, suggesting something greater than mere stylism: active meta-interaction of *The Dark Knight Returns* with the comics that came before it. Batman here indicates that there is something absurd about the costume which bears explanation, and in this way presents a stretching of the familiar into a realm of critical engagement, rather than the mere acceptance that came before.

It is not merely visual indicators which provide authenticity to the character of Batman however, otherwise any character who dressed in the suit would embody the character. The conventions of the collaboratively rendered character reach also into the personality traits, motivations, and personal morality of the character. Critic Lou Anders presents a compiled list of these requirements, assembled from the portrayals he considers to be the most influential and imperative renditions of the character. Anders opines that the characteristics he identifies have become canonical because of the lasting influence of the most culturally important and insightful retellings of Batman’s exploits, among these Miller’s *Dark Knight*.⁹⁰

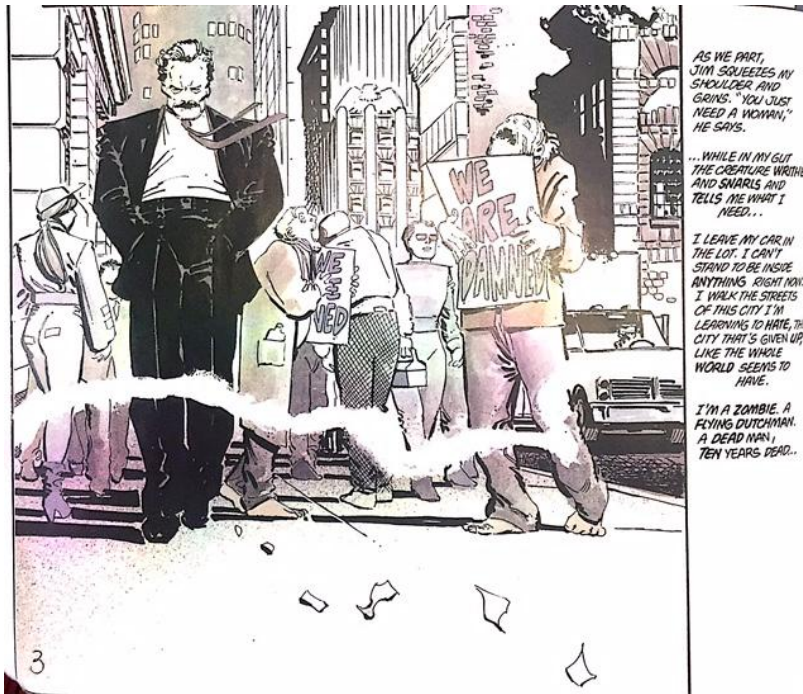
⁸⁹ Miller, *Batman: The Dark*, [42].

⁹⁰ Anders indicates these works to include: “To date, the “great works of the Batman canon” would certainly include O’Neil and Adams’ original run, the aforementioned Englehart & Rogers collaboration, Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Year One*, Alan Moore’s *The Killing Joke*, *Batman: The Animated Series* and related animated movies and spin-offs (*Mask of the Phantasm*, *Batman Beyond*, *Justice League*, etc. . . .), and Jeff Loeb and Tim Sale’s *The Long Halloween* and *Dark Victory*.” Anders, “Two of a Kind,” [37].

Anders defines these canonical characteristics as being: “sense of will, and presence, and discipline, and tightly restrained force,” the state of having “something to prove,” “a refusal to kill and an aversion to guns in particular,” and “the understanding that, unlike the vast majority of costumed crime fighters, Batman’s secret identity is not his core persona.”⁹¹ These, for Anders, are the character defining qualities without which any rendition of Batman is not authentic. Though not every canonical characteristic is met by every new iteration, it is these characteristics which provide the continuity that allows each new iteration of Batman to be representative of the character. Without these basic tenets, Batman would cease to be one character, and dissolve into a series of unrecognizable creatures.

Loyalty to these conventional necessities can be seen all throughout *The Dark Knight Returns*. One example of this attention is in the construction of the concept of Bruce Wayne as an alter-ego to the interior figure of Batman, rather than vice versa. The *Dark Knight* is based around the fact that Batman has retired. The story begins as he is ten years into this self-imposed retirement, but he can still be seen battling with what he characterizes as the alien presence of “Batman” within himself. Throughout *The Dark Knight Returns*, the way in which Bruce Wayne discusses Batman is as another person, or at least as a force over which he doesn’t truly have much control. In the first pages of *Dark Knight* Bruce Wayne walks home after having a drink with his old friend Commissioner Gordon, musing to himself about Batman.

⁹¹ Anders, "Two of a Kind," [37].



Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns 30th Anniversary Edition*
(Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2016), [5].

Wayne retired Batman ten years prior to this moment, rendering himself, without this crucially important aspect of his persona, a “dead man.” This asserts that the exterior persona that is Bruce Wayne is not necessarily the “core identity,” but rather only part of the whole. The other, quite significant, part of the character’s identity resides with the creature Wayne cannot ignore, the force without which he is “ten years dead”: the identity of Batman. Wayne struggles to keep the monster inside him at bay, but ultimately he fails, allowing the force that is Batman to escape, catalyzing the action of *The Dark Knight Returns*.

Dark Knight asserts that the Batman creature is initially triumphant over the character of Wayne—in that Wayne breaks his promise to himself to never again take up the mantle of Batman—but troubles the convention that the “Wayne” portion of the identity is entirely the empty and performative playboy. Wayne is shown in the above scene solitary though in the midst of a crowd of people. His characterization of the desire to be Batman as a “creature” which

“writhes and snarls and tells me what I need,”⁹² indicates a certain introspection, an awareness of the power that the “creature” has over him, which mirrors his previously described awareness of the mild absurdity of his chest logo. Though ultimately the creature overtakes him, he is aware of it; he describes it and acknowledges it, even anthropomorphizes it. This gesture, particularly in combination with his closing thought “I’m a zombie. A flying Dutchman. A dead man, ten years dead...”⁹³ represents a “stretching” of comics convention as well. As Wayne attempts to deny the part of himself that is Batman, he is rendered a flying Dutchman, a ship doomed to portlessness; a walking dead man, a zombie, and thus deathless. He is defined by Batman and, in his attempts to deny Batman, he is hollow, dead. In this way *Dark Knight* complies with the convention of Batman as primary “self,” but stretches the convention, portraying Bruce Wayne not as performative playboy, but as addict, fighting valiantly to keep his promises but ultimately overcome. It is in the awareness granted to Wayne that this relationship of self to alter ego is rendered somewhat subversive.

But it is the power of the snarling, writhing, powerful creature described by Wayne that incites difficult questions: what are the moral implications of a superhero’s power and drive originating from what is characterized as a vicious animal? Understanding the power and motivation of the protagonist as vicious and animalistic in this way subverts the embodiment of the work as a superhero narrative, and thus as a Batman narrative. As discussed in the last chapter, superheroes represent an uncomplicated moral understanding. But *Dark Knight*, in both traditionally representing Batman, a character so identified with comics, and simultaneously asking complicated and perhaps unanswerable questions about the moral implications of his

⁹² Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight*, [3].

⁹³ Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight*, [3].

actions, stretches the conventions of comics and perhaps even subverts the idea of them as avoiders of moral gray.

The Dark Knight Returns's assertion of itself as an authentic Batman is underscored by its forging of itself as a perfect encapsulation of the first fifty years of Batman. Miller's fifty year old Batman was born of a desire to portray "a story of Batman at the age he would be at this time if he really aged from his origins."⁹⁴ Fifty years of Batman lore led to the story of a fifty-year-old Batman, a marked departure from comics norm of age-defying superheroes whose youth and physical fitness never fades despite chronological relocation. The aging of Batman is dually significant: first, it allows Miller the opportunity to create a conventionally sound encapsulation of the Batman character, relying on the significant character history which came before; second, it provides distinction from this history, in that the character is presented in a brand new way, as an aging man.

Over the course of *The Dark Knight Returns*, there are many instances where prior knowledge of the events of the Batman canon are presented as presumed knowledge on the part of the reader. This presumption that that reader has the background information not provided specifically by the text, necessitates a reliance on the previous renderings of Batman to tell the story at hand in *Dark Knight*. There are plenty of examples of this phenom: the subtle subplot of Selina Kyle, Catwoman, alongside references to a relationship once shared between herself and Batman⁹⁵; references to "Hal" and "Diana" (The Green Lantern and Wonder Woman); references to Sarah Essen-Gordon, Commissioner Gordon's wife.⁹⁶ The inclusion of these moments in the text without specific explanation or background creates a state of implicit understanding that the

⁹⁴ Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight*, Introduction.

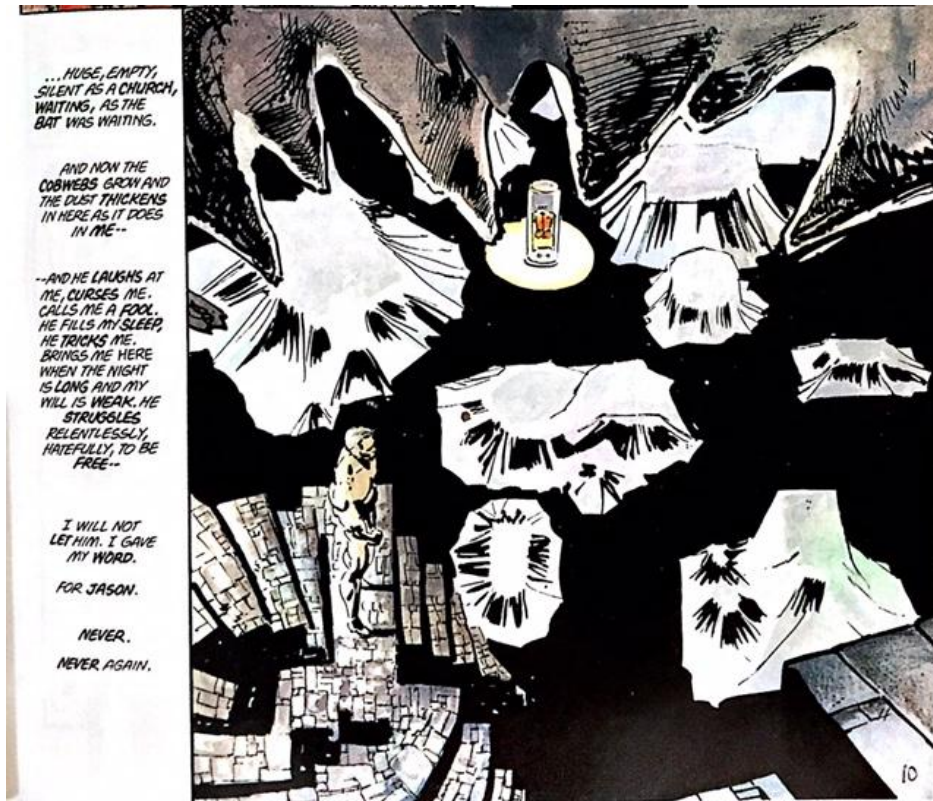
⁹⁵ Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight*, [17].

⁹⁶ Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight*, [47-8]

reader of this text is familiar with, or at least has some knowledge of, the world of Batman.

Miller is not inventing these characters or their circumstances, rather, his narrative rests on the understanding that his readers will be familiar with the stories that came before; the stories that his narrative implicitly relies on for clarity and depth, but which he himself did not specifically create. This state of affairs is pure comics tradition: mirroring as it does the reliance of many comics on the work that came before.

Perhaps the consummate example of *Dark Knight* relying on previously established storylines is in the phantom presence of Batman's second Robin, Jason Todd. In the beginning of the narrative, Wayne fights against the influence of Batman within him, relaying the memory of falling into the Batcave as a young boy after the death of his parents as a means of relaying the hypnotic pull of overcoming fear and pain which the creature, and thus the identity of Batman, represents in the wake of that traumatic event. Wayne relates the struggle of fighting the creature, but references the one thing that has kept him clinging to his retirement for all the years regardless: the death of Jason Todd.



Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns 30th Anniversary Edition*
(Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2016), [5].

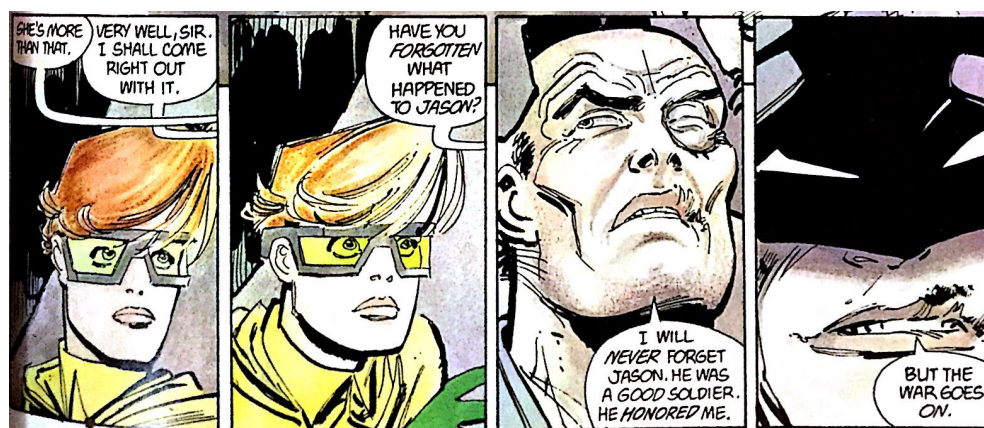
Here Wayne stands, nude in his Batcave, only spots of light illuminating the sheet-covered machinery of his past life. The only item not covered is the small glass case containing the costume which once belonged to Jason Todd, “Robin.” The imagery of this case in combination with the cryptic phrase “I gave my word. For Jason. Never. Never Again.”⁹⁷ provides the explanation for why Wayne fights the addictive urges to once more assume the identity of Batman.

This reference to “Jason” is unexplained in the text, other than in terms of its implicit visual connection to the small uniform in the glass case, and its later connection to the new Robin who emerges after Batman’s resurgence. But to readers of *Batman*, this moment would

⁹⁷ Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight*, [10]

have clear significance. Though Jason Todd had not yet been killed off in a prior storyline,⁹⁸ the inclusion of the character name and the insinuation that he had been killed in the line of duty relies on a prior knowledge of the relationship between Batman and Robin, as well as of the fact that the “Jason” referred to here is indeed Jason Todd.

Batman’s relationship to the death of Robin marks a crucial shift in the way that the character conceives of himself and his duty in *The Dark Knight Returns*, a reality which invokes the internality of both the chest-logo moment, as well as the fight against the Batman-beast within. After the emergence of Cassie Kelly, the new Robin, Alfred the Butler makes one final appeal to Batman to cease his activities, invoking the fate of Jason Todd.



Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns 30th Anniversary Edition*
(Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2016), [82]

The drastic shift in Batman’s attitude toward the death of Jason Todd indicates a clear and crucial shift in the moral reality of the character. Where before Wayne vowed never again to allow an innocent to die in the line of duty, now Batman invokes the language of war, calling Todd a “good soldier,” indicating that he died the “good death” that Batman so frequently mentions throughout the course of the story. The shift here is from Wayne’s perception of his

⁹⁸ An event which would take place two years after the release of *The Dark Knight Returns*, in the DC release of the four part series *A Death in the Family* in 1988. The decision to kill off Robin was decided by a phone poll administered to fans, who voted by a narrow margin to kill off the second iteration of the Boy Wonder.

obsession with this work as being centered in the self, and his existential concerns about the moral rectitude of his actions, to Batman's certainty that this "war" necessitates the kind of brutality and ruthlessness that is one of the defining aspects of his character. *Dark Knight* adheres to the authentic aspects of the character which render Batman ruthless, and to a certain degree fascistic. *Dark Knight* does not imagine this result of the conventions it embodies, it merely reveals it.

Miller's Batman is a conglomeration: a near perfect canonical representation of the collaboratively created, historically located character. From his objects, to his characterization, to the storylines that *Dark Knight* relies upon to tell its story with depth and nuance, Miller's Batman seeks to represent the fifty years of history that preceded its creation. In this way, *Dark Knight* asserts itself both as a comic and as an example of how comics might have more potential than previously acknowledged, even without seeking to reside in some different category (i.e. the graphic novel). It is in the ways in which Miller employs the familiar to ask difficult questions about the traditional that renders *Dark Knight* literary.

Miller does not "re-imagine" the character of Batman; his rendering, as indicated in this chapter, is soundly conventional. It is the small things that Miller chooses to highlight which provide sticking points that force the reader to consider the implications of a character like Batman being such an iconic and representative figure in American culture. Batman displays a troubling alignment to a deeply fascist ethos: he is an individual who uses his wealth and power to assert his right to carry out ruthless judgment on wrong-doers. This is reflected not merely by Miller's Batman, but by the very Batman character itself. This is the genius duality of *Dark Knight*: it represents Batman, and thus comics, and through this very representation, underlines

and asserts the validity of comics as a tradition, not merely as a medium, to discuss and comment on American identity. Do we approve of the way in which our cultural identity may be represented by a figure who complexly walks the line of heroism, standing for what is right, and willing to achieve it by any means necessary (especially when “any means necessary” is the only way to save the lives of innocent people?) Or do we denounce the fascist overtones of a vigilante who claims the right to exert his own brutal power over others, in total defiance of the law? Miller asks these questions, and he does so using a well-established, well known character in our collective cultural consciousness to do so. This is the literary power of *The Dark Knight Returns*: that it is capable of shaping its medium and its tradition to reveal a powerful potentiality that, while it was always there, was not previously capitalized upon in this way.

But what, ultimately, are the results or implications of this distinction between *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Maus* and *Watchmen*? It seems the most minute of distinctions: that two of these “Big Three” engage with their dueling influences in one way, where the other engages in a slightly different way. It is a problem of classification. These three could not be classified as twentieth century literary fiction or as comics, and so they became classified as “graphic novels.” The exercise undertaken in this chapter mirrors this process: *The Dark Knight Returns* is perhaps not properly identified as a “graphic novel,” and so the impulse to classify it as such is troubled. What results is a spiral of classification, with each new examination finding reasons to exclude or redefine each work so as to place it in a category slightly more accurate than the one before. This task is frustrating, even quotidian. After each smaller and smaller clarification, each consideration which requires the rendering of a new category, the question that makes itself clear: why? What is the purpose of this undertaking? For a further meditation on this question, I turn to the conclusion

Conclusion

There is a moment in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* where Laurie Juspecky and Dr. Manhattan travel to Mars to discuss the fate of the human race. Dr. Manhattan, beleaguered in the face of a malicious rumor that has precipitated his temporary rejection from society, asks Laurie, the woman he loves who has so recently left him, to convince him to continue saving the world in the face of the hypocrisy and smallness he sees in humanity.

Laurie tries valiantly but in vain to convince Dr. Manhattan of the inherent value of human life. Ultimately though, a revelation about her parentage—the fact that The Comedian, Edward Blake, who had once tried to rape her mother, was in fact her father—causes her to become so discouraged that she concurs with Manhattan. “My whole life’s a joke. One big, stupid, meaningless—”⁹⁹ But Manhattan cuts her off, telling her that he doesn’t think her life is meaningless, that he’s changed his mind. Laurie asks the obvious question: “But... why?”¹⁰⁰ He proceeds to explain:

⁹⁹ Alan Moore, *Watchmen*, illus. Dave Gibbons (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2014), [Page #].

¹⁰⁰ Moore, *Watchmen*, [Page #].



Alan Moore, *Watchmen*, illus. Dave Gibbons
(Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2014), [306].

Dr. Manhattan has a fascination with the delicate machinations of the universe. In the terrible revelation of Laurie's parentage, that she is the highly improbable product of a highly improbable union, Manhattan finds the revelation he has been searching for: "Until your mother loves a man she had every reason to hate, and of that union, of the thousand million children competing for fertilization, it was you, only you, that emerged. To distill so specific a form from that chaos of improbability... That is... [t]he thermodynamic miracle."¹⁰¹ Manhattan sees these glorious machinations made manifest in her human life, though it is an example of this same human life which he has come to so disdain for its smallness.

"But," Laurie pushes him, "If me, my birth, if that's a thermodynamic miracle... I mean, you could say that about anyone in the world." Dr. Manhattan agrees, "Yes. Anyone in the world." Manhattan opens himself up to the miracle of human existence: that each new person who comes into being is a thermodynamic miracle, an "event with odds against so astronomical they're effectively impossible."¹⁰² He realizes that he has been blinded by his own vastness, by

¹⁰¹ Moore, *Watchmen*, [306-7].

¹⁰² Moore, *Watchmen*, [307].

his status as being who effectively has the capacity to see all events across all of time occur at once.



Alan Moore, *Watchmen*, illus. Dave Gibbons
(Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2014), [307].

Manhattan admits that, in part, it is the commonplace nature of these miracles that has caused him to forget to look harder. He goes on to explain that because “we gaze continually at the world,” it “grows dull in our perception.” But, he reminds us “seen from another’s vantage point, as if new, it may still take the breath away.”¹⁰³ Look, he tells us; look again with the freshness that can only be provided by seeing as another sees, and you will be dazzled. The commonplace, the everyday, the most basic and fundamental things are made new in the eyes; are made miraculous by our looking.

Often it feels that the study of literature is an exercise in classification: is it postmodern? What are the influences? From what tradition does it emerge? What traditions does it lead into? These are important questions, interesting questions, questions which lead to different

¹⁰³ Moore, *Watchmen*, [Page #].

understandings of the texts we examine, and which even allow these texts to act as frames through which the problems of our world might be examined, at least in some small way. They are questions which seek to provide vastness to the texts we study: because they are part of something greater, they have a greater claim at some manner of consequence. But the impulse to classify also at times resembles a troubling adherence to the frameworks disdained by Rorschach. We become so concerned with organizing the parts of something into digestible concepts that we lose sight of the work itself. Like Dr. Manhattan, who even in all his vastness falls into the trap of the continual gaze, it is vital in this study to step back and pause, to find the moments which remind us that the things we take for granted are still miraculous.

Works like *Maus*, *Watchmen*, and *The Dark Knight Returns*, are small in the grand scheme of art and literature. They are works which meditate on Big Questions: what are the bounds of representation? How can theme help convey subjective experience in a more broadly recognizable way? What is the role of medium in the conveyance of meaning? They are classifiable and analyzable down to the very last word, down to the very last brush stroke. But ultimately they are small: representatives of a specific medium, of a specific tradition, of a specific era, of a specific influential man's body of work, three creations of human art in a vast sea of related creations. Their inherent smallness is perhaps parsed further by the impulse to analyze, which dresses these works down until the pieces are so infinitesimal that we may at times forget that each work is its own thermodynamic miracle: an event so improbable it is effectively impossible, a creation which perhaps ignites an emotion or a thought or a concern or a question in an attentive reader.

Ultimately classification is necessary in the process of understanding, and often helps to uncover things about a work that may not have been otherwise clear. Classification helps us find

new works to explore within our areas of interest; an organizational principle which is vital in the face of the vast array of works available to the modern reader. But it is equally important, at times, to pause in the process of classification, to consider the why of the pursuit. Are we pursuing classification because of a sticky question with which it can assist us in our pursuit of deeper understanding? Are we seeking classification out of our discomfort with the breaking of preconceived notions, as is perhaps the case with the popularization of the term graphic novel? Have we become lost in the sway of academic pursuit for its own sake?

In the face of these questions, it is well to remember to pause, step back, and consider what Dr. Manhattan finally remembers on that lonely red planet: in all this vast world, it is the smallest, most everyday things which can prove to be miraculous.

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